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A Tombstone & Speedy Novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

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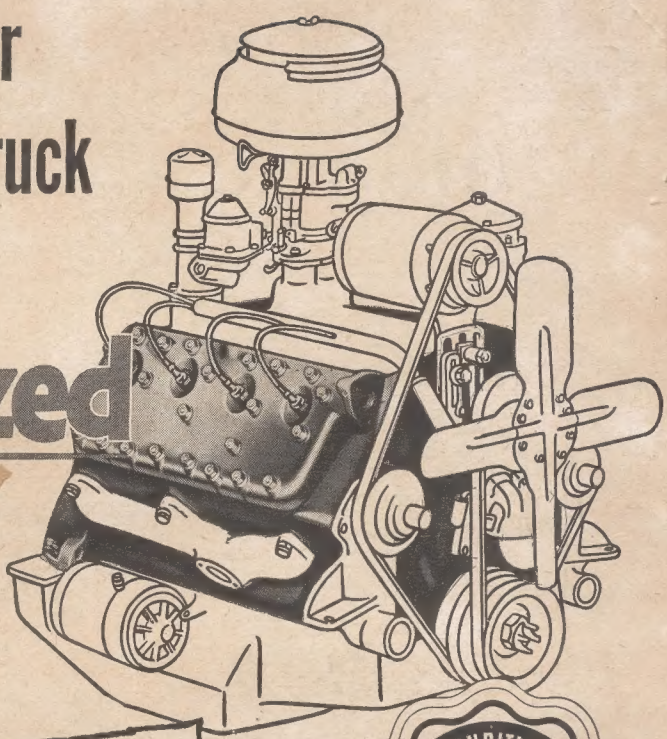

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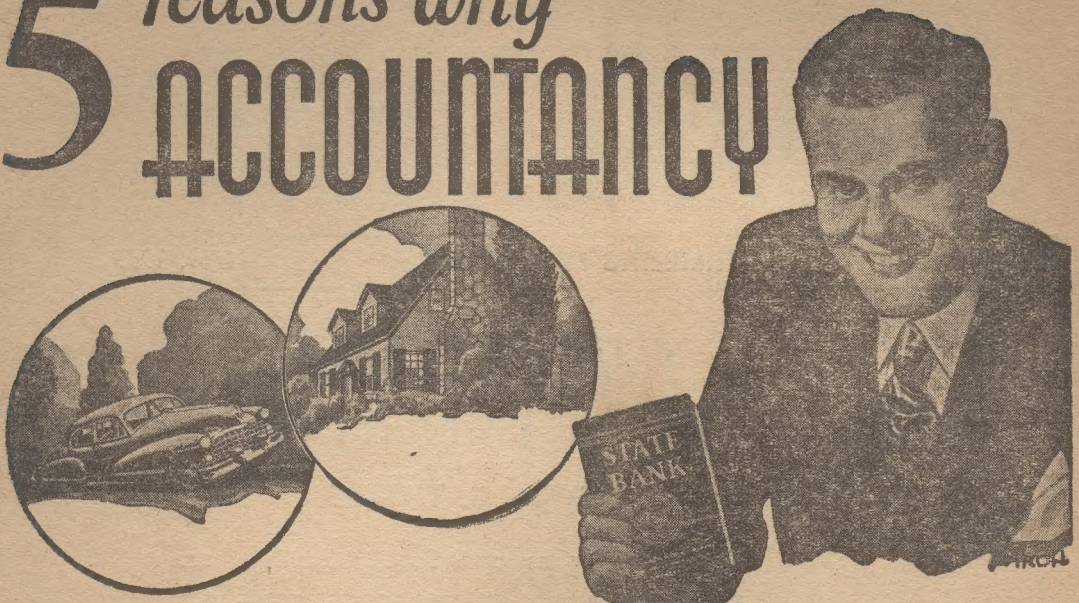

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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 19, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION May, 1950

TWO LOAFERS FROM LYNCHVILLE

By W. C. TUTTLE

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, those zany range detectives, sigh for sick leave with full pay—and almost make it when they take on a secret mission and defend a girl called Mary! A rollicking complete action novelet 11

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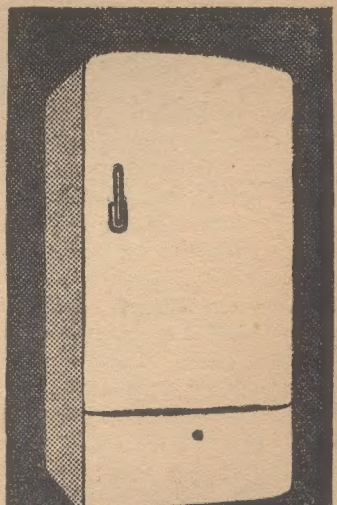

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1850—ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ICE PROGRESS—1950

A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

EVER since the West was knee-high to a gopher, Montana has been a land of cattle ranches and rich mining discoveries. Then along came the nester and the homesteader. These tillers of the soil added farming to the state's earlier enterprises.

Today stock raising, mining and agriculture are the big three in Montana's outdoor western setup. They have built Montana into a rich and lordly empire. And for those who feel the urge of the West tugging at their heartstrings the "Land of the Shining Mountains" still offers opportunities for the earnest, pioneer-minded settler.

Montana is not only a friendly state, but a big one. Its 94,000,000 acres of plains, prairie, tumbling hills and towering Rocky Mountain slopes make it the third largest in the U.S. Only Texas and California exceed it in size.

An Endless Plain

A lot of folks don't think of that when they think of Montana as just another Western state. Nor do they realize that though its name means "mountains" to a lot of suntanned, overalled hard-working farmers in eastern Montana the name is a joke. All they ever see is an endless plain marked off in checkerboard fashion, half the blocks brown fallow land and the other half, green with wheat ripening to a golden yellow with the coming of the August sun.

If they want to see the "Shining Mountains" they have to pack mom and the kids in the car and take a fishing or camping vacation in the great mountain resort sections of western Montana—even as you and I. The mountains too are where the mines are.

Farming got off to a slow but early beginning in Montana. The first farmers weren't so much homesteaders as ex-ploughboy prospectors who found themselves on the unlucky end of some of the successive early bonanza gold rushes. Knowing there was more than one way to skin a cat, they tossed away their gold pans and with true pioneer doggedness dug in and began to cultivate some of the more likely agricultural lands in the vicinity of the new gold camps.

Nuggets and Vegetables

Fresh vegetables, they figured, would bring gold nugget prices. They did. As a result many a mid-western farmer who hit early Montana in search of gold found it plying his old trade in a new and frontier setting . . . farming on the outskirts of the mining camps.

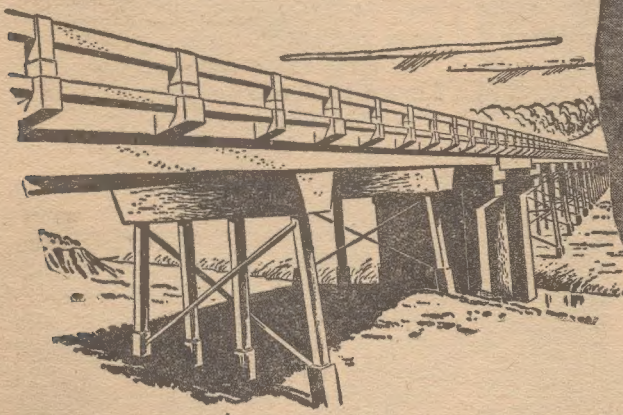
Life in the early West was full of those odd little twists and quirks. Perhaps life is pretty much the same today in that respect—wherever the adventurous are willing to set out and trust to their own resourcefulness to pull them through.

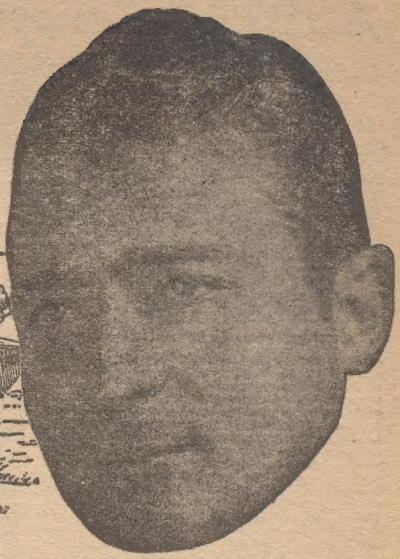
Anyhow from that start Montana became a farming as well as a mining and ranching state. Now it raises some 3,500,000 acres of wheat yearly, plus great quantities of oats, corn, barley, rye, flax, potatoes, dry beans, sugar beets, alfalfa seed, sweet clover seed, peas for canning, hay for the ranchers and apples and cherries.

The ranchers are not doing so badly either. Not with more than one and a half million beef cattle and about three and a half million sheep fattening yearly on its spacious grazing lands. In western Montana along the Jocko River near Arlee some mighty fine saddle horses are being raised right along. Sunday horses like the flashy Palominos and Appalousas Ed Lane specializes in for parade use, circuses, the movies, rodeos and plain pleasure riding.

(Continued on page 8)

I.C.S. training was his "BRIDGE TO SUCCESS"





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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

Ed is a transported Pennsylvanian. Came out to Montana first when he was 19. Liked it, and liked horses. Now aside from the purebred beef cattle he raises, his nearly 50 year old ranch is a show place for the fancy horses he breeds.

Ed must be getting on in years now. Last I heard of him he was up in the 70's, and that was some time ago.

The T Triangle

The Lane horses carry a unique brand, the T Triangle. The story is that old Teddy Roosevelt gave it to him and had it officially transferred to Ed by the State Brand Department. It seems Ed took time out years back to join up with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in the Cuba fracas and took part in some of the roughest riding there ever was—with guns—at San Juan Hill.

The full brand is a T Triangle R. Lane cattle carry that. But his show horses wear the T Triangle. The R is left off.

Outside of livestock and horses Montanans also raise in appropriately large numbers such critters as dairy cows, mules, hogs, turkeys and all sorts of poultry. Plenty of diversified creatures there for a man with experience or a yen to tackle some specialized farm animal raising of his own in Montana.

As a matter of fact Montana offers three main types of agriculture. First stock ranch operations, generally with a headquarters farm of irrigated hay meadows, fields for raising grain for winter feed, hay and so forth. These are usually sizable ranches. They represent a large investment in land, livestock, equipment—and last but not least experience in cattle ranching.

The second type of agriculture is intensive irrigation farming on smaller irrigated units, say from 80 acres up to 250 acres. Montana has some two million acres of irrigated farm land at present.

Third is the large scale dry land or non-irrigated wheat and grain growing. This is power farming on a summer fallow system and to pay off such farms are generally at least one or more sections in size. There are 640 acres to a section. Farming of this type is no backyard job. Not unless

(Continued on page 90)

ONE MAN AGAINST THE Black Hand

THIS IS JOHNNY COLUMBO..., handsome, hot-blooded ...vengeance in his heart!

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Does Johnny escape from the clutches of the BLACK HAND? Can he, alone destroy the evil band? See M-G-M's suspense thriller.

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with

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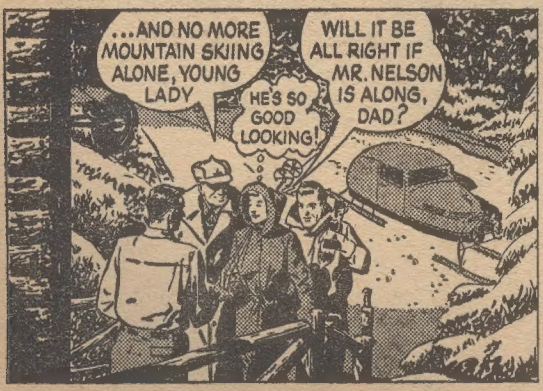
THIS COFFEE IS WONDERFUL!
WHEN YOU FEEL UP TO IT, WE'LL HEAD FOR MY STATION AND RADIO TO HEADQUARTERS
Tower Provides Entrance To Field Cabin In Deepest Snow

LATER AT HEADQUARTERS
SHE'S PERFECTLY OKAY... JUST TIRED. WE'LL BE DOWN ABOUT DARK ON THE SNOW "CAT"
YOUR DAUGHTER IS IN SAFE HANDS. NELSON'S ONE OF OUR BEST MEN



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TWO LOAFERS from LYNCHVILLE

Speedy's head hit a porch post

CHAPTER I

Rider in a Hurry

JIM KEATON, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, sat at his desk, opening the morning mail. He had just received a telegram from Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith at Lynchville, which informed him; "Cleaned up here and we are soaking in liniment. Can't you turn us loose on a job where we can get hurt bad enough to take a vacation on pay."

Jim Keaton grinned slowly at the telegram. Tombstone and Speedy had tackled a pretty tough job at Lynchville, and

The zany range sleuths sigh for sick leave with full pay—and they almost make it when they ride to the defense of a girl called Mary!

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

***by* W. C. TUTTLE**

this was his first information that things had turned out right for them. He shook his head slowly, visualizing those two men, who had lucked their way to a solution of many difficult cases. Tombstone could neither read nor write, but Speedy had a sort of cow-town-school education.

Tombstone, seven feet tall, was physically constructed to wave in any slight breeze, while Speedy was a five-foot, seven-inch replica of Tombstone. Tombstone claimed that he was the champion liar of the state, while Speedy, not claiming, wasn't far behind.

TOMBSTONE JONES

As detectives, they had solved some tough ones, possibly through dumb luck, aided by the fact that no intelligent person could ever, by any stretch of imagination, conceive that they might be cattle detectives. Jim Keaton shook his head and went back to his mail. Here was a letter, postmarked Westfield, from a girl named Mary Jones. It said:

When my dad was alive he belonged to your association. The court appointed my uncle, Len Haslin as my guardian. I didn't have anything to say about it. The sheriff says that everything is all right, but I don't believe it. Could you send a man here to find out for me. Dad told me a long time ago that you would, and that is why he joined the association.

It was rather a queer letter, but very much to the point. Jim Keaton thought it over carefully. The letter only hinted at some irregularity in the management of a ranch; an appeal from a girl, unquestionably a minor.

HIS eyes picked up the telegraph blank, on which was written the message from Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith. This didn't look like an assignment in which they could get hurt bad enough to take a vacation on pay, but it might turn out to their satisfaction. Jim Keaton drew a deep breath, picked up a telegraph blank and wrote quickly:

GO TO WESTFIELD AND SEE MARY JONES. TELL HER I SENT YOU. MIGHT BE DANGEROUS SO WORK SECRETLY.

Tombstone and Speedy had made seven trips to the little depot in Lynchville, inquiring about an answer to their telegram. On the eighth trip, the weary-looking depot agent gave them the wire from Jim Keaton. They sat down on the shady side of the depot and Speedy read it aloud to Tombstone.

"Mary Jones?" gasped the elongated Tombstone, his eyes wide. "Why, my uncle, Moody Jones had a daughter named Mary! Well, can yuh beat that? Imagine me bein' se-lected to save my cousin!"

"He didn't say to save her, you knot-brain!" snorted Speedy. "He said to *see* her."

"Read it again, will yuh?" asked Tombstone. "Go ahead."

Speedy read it again, and Tombstone exploded violently.

"Tell her I sent yuh, eh? Wants all the credit, does he? What's dangerous? To tell her he sent us? Huh! He don't need to worry."

Speedy squinted at the telegram, before pocketing it.

"Work secretly!" he snorted. "Work secretly—and tell a woman!"

"Uh-huh," agreed Tombstone. "I wonder what happened to Uncle Moody? The telegram didn't say, did it? No, that's right, it didn't. But I've got me a pre-

monition that all ain't well with Moody. Fact is, he was allus kinda spindlin'. Paw said they didn't think they'd raise him. Well, as I've allus said, here today, gone tomorrow. Still and all, yuh can't tell about life."

"Listen you, jug-head!" snorted Speedy. "All we know is that we've got to see Mary Jones."

"Ain't that enough?" queried Tombstone. "Speedy, I'll betcha we'll have a family reunion of the Jones tribe. I can hardly wait to see my kin-folks. First thing to do is to find out where this here Westfield is located. C'mon, let's hit the grit; Mary may need me."

They rattled their high-heel boots and spurs down the wooden sidewalk to the sheriff's office, where they found Shiner Bates, the deputy, taking his ease in the sheriff's chair.

Speedy said, "Shiner, where-at is a place called Westfield?"

Shiner lifted his right hand, waved it in a weak gesture, and said, "Oh, she's kinda pi-yah, as yuh might say. Hundred and fifty miles, about, as the crow flies. Whatcha want to know for?"

"Anythin' between here and there?" asked Tombstone.

"Air and dirt, I reckon. Must be—it's country."

"If you wanted to go over there, how'd yuh go?" asked Speedy.

Shiner shut both eyes and thought it over. Finally he said:

"Well, I'll tell yuh, boys—you could go by way of Chicago, or yuh could go by way of San Francisco. I'd take San Francisco—'cause I ain't never seen the ocean. It must be a pretty sight. Livin' out here, you can't imagine that there's water enough anywhere to float a boat."

"Listen to me, you badge-wearin' badger!" snorted Speedy. "If you went to either Chicago or San Francisco, you'd have to come back to this state."

"Oh, shore yuh would, but it'd be a nice trip. You can't deny that fact. 'Course, if you was crazy enough to go direct there."

"We're jist that crazy, Shiner," said Tombstone.

"Well, under them strained circumstances, if I didn't want to cover a lot of country, I'd go plumb south from here, hit the trail on Deadman's Creek, go over the top and drop down into Chino Valley. You'll find Westfield over there—about the middle of the place."

"Hundred and fifty miles, as the crow flies?" asked Speedy.

THE tall thin cowboy stared at his partner for a long moment.

"Who ever measured for the crow?" asked Tombstone.

"You'd prob'ly git lost," sighed Shiner,

SPEEDY JONES

"and I'd be to blame. Wish I could go along and show yuh the way, but I can't. On second thought, I'd hate to send yuh that way. Allus feel guilty of sendin' yuh to yore demises."

"How," asked Speedy, "do we find Deadman's Creek?"

"I'll make yuh a map," replied Shiner, reaching for a pencil and paper. "I'm awful good at makin' maps."

"You ort to take it up as a career," suggested Tombstone, "and stop clutterin' up an office like this."

Shiner Bates was a very good map maker. In fact, this map was so well drawn that had Tombstone and Speedy

been able to decipher it entirely and follow it exactly, they would, after traveling possibly three hundred miles, been back in Lynchville again.

"It's shore pretty," said Tombstone. "I'll keep that map. If I ever git a shack of my own, I'll have it framed for the wall."

"Such praise," said Shiner soberly, "touches me to the quick."

"I reserve my praise," said Speedy, "but thank yuh for yore effort. If yuh never see us again, rejoice and be exceeding glad, because I swore to kill the next man that sent us on a shortcut."

"If you ain't got brains enough to foller a map—don't blame me," sighed Shiner. "I've done my purtiest."

They found Deadman's Creek, where Speedy studied the map for a while and threw it away. Tombstone protested, but Speedy said:

"This is all we wanted to know—and I don't trust Shiner Bates. There's too darned many arrows on it to suit me. C'mon."

They camped in an old varmint hunter's shack that night, near the top of the divide, where the rain clouds hung low. This time they brought enough food for two meals, but the roof leaked and the wind whistled through the window openings, in which there had never been any windows. With a roaring fire in the fireplace, and water dripping down onto their slickers, they spent the night. It was still raining next morning, when they got soggily into their saddles and started on the downgrade to Chino Valley.

While there had been a fairly well-marked trail to the summit, there was none beyond. Hour after hour they made detours, avoiding down-timber, canyons and washouts—always going down into the indefinite grayness of the beyond.

The gray day faded to black night, before they struck a road.

"At least," said Tombstone thankfully, "we're down."

"We're down here," said Speedy. "What this is or where we are is all guess-work. Watch for a light. If there's a road, there must be people—some'ers."

"I'd be glad to see one," remarked Tombstone. "I'd especially like to see one that had a dry house and some hot mulligan."

"From the amount of mud," said Speedy, "it must have been rainin' here since Sittin' Bull got over his rheumatiz and stood up."

They splashed along through the mud. Finally they discovered a fence along the road. Tombstone said, "Fences mean human habitation."

"I see a light!" exclaimed Speedy. "Over there to the left! It ain't so far away. Watch for the gate, will yuh?"

A sheet of rain cut off their view of the small light, but it twinkled again, before Speedy found the old gate. It sagged on its hinges in the mud, and resisted Speedy's efforts to swing it wide. He had it open about ten feet, when out of the murk came a rider on a galloping horse, too close to make a stop. There is no doubt he intended going through the gateway, but misjudged his distance.

HIS horse struck Tombstone's horse, and almost at the same moment something quite hard hit Tombstone on the top of the head. Speedy fell away in the mud, as the horse and rider crashed into the old gate, throwing a shower of mud over all of them, and was gone into the darkness, the horse floundering in the mud.

"And that," declared Speedy, catching his breath, "beats anythin' on earth by about five lengths."

"Are yuh all right?" asked Tombstone.

"No, I ain't—but I'm normal. Did you get hit?"

"I hope to tell yuh! Somethin' hit me in the head."

"Then yuh're all right. My, my, but that jigger was hasty! I'm all mud! Well, we don't have to open the gate any further."

"Are we goin' up to that house?" asked Tombstone. "After all, he didn't treat us very nice, yuh know."

"Aw, it may just be his way. Some folks are impulsive thataway."

Speedy mounted and they rode toward the dimly lighted window. It wasn't over two hundred feet from the gate. Near the sagging porch stood a thoroughly beaten horse, its head hanging, sides still heaving. Tombstone said, "I hate men who abuse horses."

"Forget the hate," advised Speedy. "What I want is a tight roof, a hot fire and

Speedy fell into the mud as horse and rider crashed by

some grub. Everythin' else is forgiven."

No one answered their knock on the door; so Tombstone opened it. On a crude table burned an old oil lamp, almost dry, judging from the smoking chimney, but giving some illumination. As Speedy started to close the door, a voice mumbled:

"No yuh don'—blast yuh! You ain't—leavin'!"

On the one bunk was a man, sprawled on some dirty blankets, the upper part of his body twisted so he could face them. In a dirty hand was a six-shooter, which pointed at them. His hair was down over his eyes, and he peered at them, like a wild animal. Speedy said, "Hyah, friend. Yuh can put down that gun."

The muzzle wavered, and it seemed that with one supreme effort the man pulled the trigger. The small shack shuddered from the concussion of the forty-five, but the bullet missed them by several feet. Both Tombstone and Speedy had dropped flat, guns in their hands, looking with amazement, as the gun slowly slid from the man's relaxed hand, and fell to the floor.

"Match that, will yuh?" breathed Speedy, getting slowly to his feet. "Even to his dyin' breath, he was a killer."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Tombstone. "He shore had a idea."

CHAPTER II

Corpse in a Shack

RELAXING, Tombstone and Speedy holstered their guns, and looked around the place. There was no stove, no food—nothing. They took the lamp closer and looked the man over. Whiskers and mud hid his features. His faded shirt was gobby with half-dried blood, and there was a gory trail from the door to the bunk.

"Dead, huh?" queried Tombstone.

"Well, if he ain't, he shore knows how to act thataway. Bein' hard hit, he forgot the gate, I guess."

They stood there and looked at the dead man, not knowing just what to do next. Speedy said:

"Yuh know somethin'?"

"Of course I know somethin'. What?"

"If anybody was trailin' that whipoorwill, and if they find us here, they'll think we shot him!"

"Yea-a-ah! Me and you better yank loose from this shack, before somethin' like that happens. C'mon. Better blow out that light as yuh go past it."

They went out in the rain, piled on their horses and rode back to the smashed gate. Tombstone said, "I wonder what that feller hit me with? It seemed to go right on past me."

"Don't worry about that—as long as it went past. If it hadn't, you might have got hurt."

They slogged along for a while, when Speedy said:

"What did that feller look like, anyway?"

"He had a dirty face and whiskers," replied Tombstone. "Yeah, he had on overalls and a dirty shirt—and he looked mean."

"That's a swell description," said Speedy. "How can we tell the sheriff that we found—he-e-y! Why should we tell him anythin'? After all, we didn't come here to *tell* things—we came to find out things."

"Now yuh're gettin' sensible," applauded Tombstone. "No tell'm. After all, he ain't none of our business. Tellin' him would mean we'd have to explain what we was doin' there—or lie about it."

"And we both hate liars," added Speedy dryly.

"And how we hate 'em! Look! There's lights ahead! Do yuh suppose we've done found Westfield? If we have, you ort to write Shiner Bates and thank him for the map."

"Yeah. Tell him we found it in spite of him."

They had really found Westfield, a sizable cattle town, but not too active in this sort of weather. They found space at the feed corral for their horses, took their war-bags and went hunting for a place to eat. A small cafe, operated by Chinese, attracted them. The place was comfortably filled, but no one paid any attention to them as they found two places at a long table. Men there were arguing over a robbery, and it developed that the Apache Saloon and Gambling Parlor had been stuck up by three masked men. One

of the men in the restaurant was loud in his declaration that at least one of the three masked men had been hit.

"I tell yuh I heard one of 'em yell, jist as he was pilin' on his bronc, 'I've been hit!' "

"Aw, you heard Shorty McClure yellin'," said a cowboy. "He got hit in the heel of his boot, and it stood him on his face. He's still yellin' about it."

"Well," said another, "maybe one of 'em got hit, but we ain't found no body yet. They've got Johnny Grant in jail, with the sheriff, deputy and the prosecutin' attorney trying to make him confess and tell who was with him."

"Aw, Johnny never done it!" snorted a lanky cowpuncher. "He's a nice kid."

"A blasted fool of a kid, too!" snorted another. "He dropped his gun, as they backed out—and the sheriff's got it. It's got his initials on it. I've allus contended that a man hadn't ort to put his initials on his gun—it's a dead giveaway."

A CHINESE waiter took the order from Tombstone and Speedy. The crowd drifted away, until only Tombstone and Speedy were left in the restaurant. They asked the waiter about the holdup, and he shook his head.

"Velly bad," he commented. "No good. Steal plenty. Too much bullet. Got away, too, I t'nk. You want coffee?"

They did—plenty of it. After a heavy meal, they found the one hotel in town, a two-story, ramshackle place on the main street, the little lobby foggy with tobacco-smoke from pipe and cigarettes. Men were sitting around, still discussing the robbery. They looked curiously at Tombstone and Speedy, as they came in, carrying their war-bags.

Hooty Decker, the elderly hotelkeeper, eyed them with a glint of suspicion, but shoved out the dog-eared register. As Speedy signed their names, Tombstone turned, backed against the desk, his elbows on the desk-top, and looked over the men, his wet sombrero cocked over one eye. He was a foot taller than any other man in the room. One man, a burly, hard-faced individual, said:

"Who are you and where did yuh come from?"

"Originally," replied Tombstone, "I was borned in Cripple Creek. My youth was spent in pickin' wild-flowers, tamin' rattlers and filin' the claws off'n bob-cats. As I growed older—"

"Never mind bein' funny!" snapped the man. "Who are yuh?"

"I am," replied Tombstone loftily, "the fav'rite nephew of Moody Jones."

The room was silent for several moments, when the big man said:

"Well, can yuh imagine that? A nephew of Moody Jones! Well, ain't that somethin' to brag about! Who is Moody Jones?"

"My uncle," replied Tombstone quietly. "I was named Jones—after him."

Speedy turned around and tried hard to glare at the big man, but saw the sheriff's insignia on his wrinkled shirt, and grinned.

"What's the idea of the interrogations, Sheriff?" he asked.

"The what?"

"Interrogations? Yuh don't even know—all right, I'll put it thisaway; what's the idea of all the questions?"

"Three men pulled a holdup here tonight."

SPEEDY looked around carefully and shook his head.

"There's only two of us," he said, and turned back to the man behind the desk to get the key to their room. Somebody laughed, but sobered quickly, as the sheriff walked out. A man said:

"Parke's awful upset, don't yuh know it?"

One of them said to Tombstone, "You'll have to excuse him—he's new at the sheriffin' business, and this is his first holdup."

"How much did he get?" asked Tombstone soberly.

"How much did—aw, he didn't pull the robbery. I didn't mean he done it himself."

"Are yuh sure?" queried Speedy.

"Why, of course—uh-h-h—"

Tombstone pointed a long fore-finger at the man, and said:

"Where-at was you when the shootin' took place?"

"Where was I? Well, I was at home, and I can prove it."

"You didn't see it, eh? Likely story."

Two men walked out of the lobby. Tombstone said:

"That's all I wanted to know, gents. The rest of yuh can go."

Strangely enough, they all went. Hooty Decker said, "Well, I'll be a handy-man to a hoot-owl!"

"Anythin' yuh say can be used against yuh," warned Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah," said Hooty quietly.

"We might as well go to bed," said Tombstone. "I'm glad we got here in time to prevent this town from hangin' a innocent man."

Hooty Decker stared at them, as they went up the one flight of stairs and disappeared down the dark hallway. He rubbed his chin, looked at the register again and sat down.

"Jones?" he muttered. "I wonder if he's any kin to Sylvester. And who in the devil is Moody Jones?"

Up in their room, Speedy said, "Who ever told you that they were goin' to hang an innocent man?"

"Oh, I just had a hunch," replied Tombstone, grinning widely.

"Uh-huh," said Speedy dubiously. "Yuh know, sometimes I can't figure you out."

"Me neither," agreed Tombstone. "Man, it'll seem good to dig into a dry bed! Brand new sheriff here, too."

"Yeah, and he looks like a unfriendly bull-dog."

"That he does. Demandin' to know where we came from! Just as though it was any of his business. I told him, didn't I?"

"Yeah, yuh lied to him. Since when was you born in Cripple Creek? You've done claimed Texas, Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico, Dakota, Montana as a birthplace. And now yuh jump to Colorado."

"I reckon I was jist born with the wanderlust, Speedy."

About thirty minutes later Parke Shevlin, the sheriff, came back to the hotel lobby. He read the last two names on the register, spat viciously on the floor and said to Hooty Decker:

"Jones and Smith, from Lynchville, eh? I'll wire the sheriff over there. Two strangers, comin' here so soon after the robbery, don't look good to me."

"Should have waited, eh?" asked Hooty.

"Waited? What do yuh mean—waited?"

"Why, waited until after the excitement, before comin', Parke."

"Hooty, sometimes you don't show any brains at all!"

"Thank yuh, Parke—for sayin' 'sometimes.' I've knowed folks who didn't show brains at any time. Parke, who is Moody Jones?"

"I've been wonderin' about that myself. Well, I've got to send that wire." It read:

JONES AND SMITH CLAIM TO HAVE COME FROM LYNCHVILLE. IS THAT TRUE?

The answer to the telegram came next morning, and read:

YES, THANK THE LORD.

It was signed by Shiner Bates, deputy sheriff.

"Now, that don't make sense," complained the sheriff.

"What does?" asked Rusty Gates, the deputy, in a sepulchral voice. "If they wanted to come from Lynchville, it's all right with me."

SHEVLIN scowled and then raised his heavy bullying voice angrily.

"Well, it ain't all right with me. Why, them two actually accused—well, they—oh, I don't know what I mean!"

"Confession is good for the soul," said Rusty quietly. "Did yuh talk with Johnny Grant this mornin'?"

"No, I ain't had time. He didn't confess, did he?"

"No, but he talked plenty."

"He did, eh?" queried the sheriff quickly. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he jist said that as soon as he got out of here, he'd kick my pants up so high that I could throw away my belt and button 'em to my ears. Yuh know somethin', Parke? He don't like his aigs turned over."

"Yuh're a big help to me," sighed the sheriff.

"Be a heap less—if Johnny makes good his threat."

"Oh, hello," said a voice at the doorway, where Tombstone and Speedy were peering into the office. The sheriff didn't say anything intelligible. In fact, it was sort of a moaning sound, as he walked out past them.

"Duck yore head and come in," invited the deputy. "Twenty-one hands high, if

he's a inch! Set down, gents. I'm Rusty Gates, deputy sheriff, of short-standin'."

"I'm Speedy Smith and this'n is Tombstone Jones," said Speedy seriously. "Glad to meetcha, Rusty. How's all yore folks?"

"All I've got left is my Aunt Evelyn, and she's poorly, thank yuh."

"Yuh're welcome, I'm sure," said Tombstone brightly. "So you are the deputy sheriff."

"A stalwart minion of the law," added Speedy.

"If I only knowed what you mean by that," sighed Rusty, and they all laughed. Rusty said:

"Parke Shevlin, who just left here, said he had met yuh. By the way, he sent a telegram to Lynchville, askin' if you two were from there, and here's the answer." Speedy read it aloud:

" 'Yes, thank the Lord.' "

"He's glad we got here, bless his little soul!" exclaimed Tombstone. "I love and ad-mire that knot-head."

"Yuh're gettin' more simple every day," said Speedy.

"You boys ain't seekin' work, are yuh?" asked Rusty.

"Don't be silly," advised Speedy. "What was all the questions the sheriff flung at us last night? Do we look suspicious?"

"We had a robbery here last night," explained Rusty. "Three masked men stuck up the Apache, and made a cleanup. If yuh ask me, it was a sucker trick, but it worked. When they made their getaway, everybody got in everybody else's way, and—well, one gambler got shot through the shoulder, and another party, name of Shorty McClure got one heel almost shot off."

"Where was you and the sheriff?" asked Tombstone.

"Eatin' supper down at the Chinaman's place. Didn't even know we was havin' a holdup, until a bullet busted a window. Some energetic soul, seein' and hearin' the shots at the Apache, pulled a gun, started to run up there, but tripped over his own legs and shot a hole in the window."

"Interestin'," observed Tombstone. "Tell us more, Rusty."

"Ain't much more to tell. One of the robbers dropped his gun near the back door of the saloon, and we got it. On that gun was the initials of Johnny Grant. J. U. G. Johnny Ulysses Grant. We went out and found him at his little ranch-house. 'Course he denied it—but he's in jail. Mary was in this mornin' to have a confab with him."

"Mary was, huh? Who is Mary?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. She's Mary Jones. Owns the SJ spread. She loves Johnny Grant. She's got a plain name but she ain't plain. Wait'll you see her—she'll make yore heart pound."

"I'd shore admire to meet her," remarked Tombstone.

"Yuh better go easy, feller," advised Speedy. "Yore heart's in such a confined space that any poundin' might bust a rib. How long you been deputy in this here town, Rusty?"

"Since last November—last month, as yuh might express it. And all I've done is to set. I'd like to do somethin', like catchin' them other two fellers who robbed the Apache."

"You seem certain that Johnny Grant is guilty."

[*Turn page*]

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RUSTY nodded slowly, as if he weren't exactly satisfied about something.

"Well, we found his gun. Men saw the masked man drop it. What more evidence do yuh need?"

"A confession from the man who dropped it. Rusty, would yuh like to find one of them men?"

"Huh?" grunted Rusty. "What do yuh mean?"

Quietly Speedy told Rusty what had happened at the old shack beside the road last night, and, for a wonder, Rusty believed them.

"Somebody said that one of 'em got hit!" he exclaimed. "Get yore horses, cowboys. We're goin' man-huntin'."

If Rusty had any idea of doing something for himself, the sheriff interrupted. He, very pointedly, wanted to know just where did they think they were going? Rusty shrugged and told the sheriff what Tombstone and Speedy had told him. Parke Shevlin listened grimly to the story.

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" asked Shevlin.

"You didn't ask me," replied Tombstone meekly. "All you wanted to know was who are we and where'd we come from."

"Fine thing!" snapped Shelvin. "A thing like this happens, and I'm left in ignorance!"

Rusty started to mumble something, as he climbed in his saddle, and the sheriff snapped,

"Rusty, I don't care for yore type of humor!"

"All I said was," declared Rusty defensively, "was that it wasn't anythin' that started last night."

The sheriff jerked into his saddle and turned on Speedy.

"Do you realize that you've concealed evidence from the law?"

"Yes, and no," replied Speedy. "We didn't know the law wanted him."

"Yuh didn't, eh? You knew the man had a hole in him, and was dead, didn't yuh?"

"Oh, shore—we think he did and was. But there's lots of ways of lookin' at it, Sheriff. Maybe he allus had that bullet hole in him, and the wet weather opened it up. There's so many things."

"Are you just plain dumb—or do you merely practise it?"

"Well, I suppose it comes from practise, Sheriff."

CHAPTER III

Blazing Guns

PUTTING their horses to a fast lope, the four men rode out to the old gate, which had been practically ruined by the impact of the running horse. Rusty said that the shack had not been occupied for several years, probably belonged to no one, and should have fallen down years ago. The door was closed, but not fastened. However, the dead man was not on the old bunk. The bloodstains were still on the bunk and along the floor. They went outside and looked all around, but there were no signs of the body. Rain had washed out the horse-tracks.

The sheriff was very sour over the whole thing. He said:

"If you'd have told me this last night, we'd have found him. If we had just one of the three, maybe we could tie him in with the other two. Don't you realize I could jail you two for not tellin' the law?"

"Sure." Tombstone grinned. "Go ahead, Sheriff. Then try to prove to a judge that there *ever was* a dead man in here."

"Yuh see," added Speedy, "we didn't tell this under oath. And the law don't recognize a lie, unless it's told under oath."

Rusty said, "That ain't bein' too awful dumb, Parke."

"All right, all right! Let's go back. Forget the dead man in the shack. I don't believe he ever was there."

"Neither do I," said Speedy soberly. "As far as that blood is concerned, maybe some cowpuncher had a nosebleed."

Parke Shevlin shook his head, as they rode along. He couldn't quite figure out these two, skinny cowboys. He knew it would be useless to ask them why they came to Westfield. They seemed so serious about everything, poker-faced, innocent of any wrongdoing.

They had stabled their horses and were at the office, when Len Haslin came down there. Len was a big, slovenly sort of

person, badly in need of a shave. His lips were stained with tobacco. Rusty introduced Tombstone and Speedy to Len. Len said to the sheriff:

"Been out doin' a little sheriffin', Parke?"

"Kinda lookin' around, Len. You ain't heard of anybody bein' dead around here, have yuh?"

"Dead? Around here? No, I ain't, Parke. What's the joke?"

"Oh, nothin' much—except that Jones and Smith claim they found a dead man in the old Harper shack, when they came in last night. He ain't there now."

"I thought you were goin' to forget it, Parke," said Rusty.

"Slipped out, I reckon." The sheriff grinned. Len looked sharply at Tombstone and Speedy. "Found a dead man, eh?" he queried.

"I don't reckon so," replied Speedy. "Must have been somethin' else that we saw. We're easy to confuse, especially on dead men."

"Was he dead, when yuh first saw him?" asked Len curiously.

"If he was," replied Tombstone, "he was tied on. He banged into us at the gate, went straight to the shack. No, I don't reckon he was dead, 'cause he tried to shoot us, jist before the Pearly gate shut him off."

"You didn't tell me about that," said the sheriff.

"You didn't ask us," interjected Tombstone. The sheriff shrugged his shoulders and walked out with Len.

"Len," explained Rusty, "is Mary Jones' uncle. He is also her guardian, if yuh know what that means. He runs the ranch for her."

"I think he's lovely and re-fined," remarked Speedy. "He must have a big heart."

"Why?" asked Rusty.

" 'Cause the rest of him is big. Prob'ly got a big gizzard and a big gall, too. I imagine he's quite a fighter."

"They say he's never been licked," replied Rusty.

"Then it'll come as a big surprise," declared Tombstone.

"What will?" asked Rusty quickly.

"Gettin' licked."

"Oh! Well, I'd like to see it."

"Rusty," queried Speedy, "what was Mary Jones' father's name?"

"Sylvester."

AN EXPRESSION of surprise came over Tombstone's face.

"Sylvester?" gasped Tombstone. "Well, I'll be darned! He was my father's youngest brother! Poor Sylvester! What happened to him?"

"Yuh're the dog-gondest claim-agent on earth!" declared Speedy. "Yore father never had a brother named Sylvester."

"They found him dead—out on the range. Neck broke. Said he got throwed off his horse, but I tell yuh there was rope-burns on his neck."

"Foul play, huh?" grunted Tombstone. "I'll betcha it was. That's the only way yuh can do away with a Jones."

"How does Uncle Len horn into this deal?" asked Speedy.

"Well, Len Haslin owns the Box Eighty. He was a brother to Mary's mother, when she was alive of course."

"Yeah, that makes a difference," agreed Tombstone. "Go ahead."

"Well, after Sylvester died, the court appointed Len Haslin as Mary's guardian, which also puts him in charge of the SJ. That's all the story. Johnny Grant is what yuh might call a strugglin' young cowman. Not that I've ever seen him struggle very hard. He's got a little spread down south of here. Until Mary's father died Johnny worked lots of extra time for the SJ. Sylvester liked him, and Johnny needed the extra money."

"And Johnny lost his gun at the hold-up, huh? Careless, I'd say."

Later that day Tombstone and Speedy sat on the hotel porch and wondered just what to do. Speedy pointed out that they could hardly ride out to the SJ and tell Mary Jones that Jim Keaton sent them.

"Can't, huh?" queried Tombstone. "Yuh mean she wouldn't believe us?" Speedy merely shrugged.

"If she needs our help," explained Tombstone, "we've got to help her."

"Listen, jug-head," said Speedy. "Nobody knows we're detectives. If we go out there to talk with her, they'll suspect us. And if there is somebody givin' her a bad deal, we might get our earthly envelopes slit awful quick."

"We have to play dumb, huh?"

"We remain as ever, sincerely yours,"

said Speedy soberly.

There was big play at the Apache that night, every game filled. Tombstone mourned openly about not having money enough to buck the roulette. Rusty introduced them to several people, but to Tombstone Jones, almost empty of pocket, it was a wasted evening. About ten o'clock Speedy suggested that a good sleep wouldn't hurt them a bit, and Tombstone agreed.

They walked over to the doorway, with Speedy in the lead, and were about to step out on the wooden sidewalk when Tombstone suddenly dived ahead, struck Speedy low, sending him headlong across the sidewalk, while Tombstone, falling with his blocking tackle, dived to his hands and knees.

They were still falling, when two shotgun blasts went over their heads, ripping buckshot through the doorway, and practically ruining every glass and bottle on the backbar. Men were ducking under tables, the bartender was flat on the floor behind the bar, when glass was still flying through the air.

Speedy came up short, when his head hit a porch-post, and Tombstone, his his knees ripped from the rough boards, came up to a sitting position, with a gun in his hand. Men were running around, shouting questions. No more shots were fired. Men crunched over broken glass, as they came to the doorway, spewing out onto the sidewalk.

Speedy was wailing, "You big, clumsy knot-head, you! You busted my head into that post! Why can'tcha ever do anythin' right?"

"Who shot at yuh?" demanded a man in the crowd. "Are yuh hurt?"

Tombstone got up, rubbing his knees, while Speedy sat against the post, holding his head.

"Well, we didn't get hit, if that's what yuh mean," replied Tombstone.

"Two loads of buckshot—and nobody hurt," marveled a man. "Look at that backbar! Poor shootin', I'd say."

While the men milled around, trying to satisfy their curiosity, Tombstone took Speedy's arm, and they went to the hotel. Hooty Decker, the hotel keeper, was in the doorway, full of questions.

Tombstone said, "I ain't got time for answers. Look at my pardner, will yuh? Head almost shot off. I've got to tie him up, before his brains all leak out."

"My heavens!" exclaimed Hooty. "Bleedin', too. Can I help yuh?"

"Stay here and keep them shotgun men from follerin' us, will yuh?"

"Hu-u-u-uh?" gasped Hooty, but they didn't wait for more.

SPEEDY had a cut about an inch long in his scalp, and the spot was almost golf-ball size. Tombstone washed it carefully, tore the tail off one of Speedy's best shirts and tied it around his head.

"How does it look?" asked Speedy painfully, as he undressed.

"Swell," grinned Tombstone. "Most of the slack has been took up, I reckon. My, my, what a lot of loose skin you had on yore head! Good thing, too. If you was tight-skinned I'd worry. Look at my knees, will yuh?"

"Exactly what happened?" asked Speedy. "I don't get it."

"Well, as you started to step outside, I seen the shine on a gun-barrel, as a man lifted it. There was only one thing to do, and that was to knock you spinnin', and go likewise. Man, them buckshot shore depleted that back-bar."

Speedy crawled into bed, half-sitting against his pillow, while Tombstone pulled a few splinters out of his sore knees, before going around the bed, against the wall, and easing himself between the blankets.

"Everythin' is complete," said Speedy, "except that you done forgot to lock the door and blow out the light."

Tombstone started to ease his legs out of bed when the door opened and in came the sheriff. He closed the door and came over to the bed. He said, "I came to have a talk with you. After all, they say somebody tried to murder you fellers. You better tell me why."

"If we knew who and why, do yuh think we'd be holed up here?" retorted Tombstone. "Have a little sense."

"You must have been expectin' to be dry-gulched."

"How do yuh figure that, Sheriff?"

"You ducked under two loads of buckshot, and yuh don't do a thing like that, unless yuh expect it."

"I was tripped," declared Speedy. "Tripped and bumped. Ain't it enough"

to have yore whole scalp torn off, without you comin' up here and accuse us of bein' —well, of bein'—"

"Yes?" nodded the sheriff. "Go ahead —of bein' what?"

"Dumb enough to hang around a one-horse town, waitin' for some hooligan to load us up with buckshot. Go away, will yuh? My head aches. After all—oh-oh! More folks comin'!"

Speedy's "more folks" were two masked men, with guns in their hands. One of them closed the door. The sheriff turned his head and looked at them helplessly.

"We didn't know you was here but it don't matter," said one of them huskily. "There's more'n one way that you can skin a cat."

"The best way," offered Tombstone, "is first to catch yore cat," and fell off the back side of the bed.

His gun and belt were on the floor, and he fell on them. The masked men didn't dare take their eyes off the sheriff. So it was a sort of stale-mate, until Tombstone, cramped for vision, shot at a boot-heel from beneath the bed. It was a good shot, too—it took the foot right along with it.

An instant later Speedy threw his pillow at the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

The door opened inward, and it seemed as though everyone in the room wanted to go outward at the same time. No more shots were fired, because it was impossible to tell friend from foe. Speedy, in spite of his aching head, dived for somebody to do battle with.

Tombstone was in the thick of it, banging with both hands and getting banged plenty. A man drove him backwards, and he felt the window crash behind him. Reaching out his long arms, he got the man in a death grip, and they went out together, amid crashing glass, splintered window-frame, and came down together, but with Tombstone on top.

Speedy, knocked down twice, went back for more. The door was open now, and Speedy, fighting through sheer instinct, got a bulldog hold on a man, took him down the narrow hall with a series of rushes, mixed with fighting profanity, and they pinwheeled down the stairs into the lobby.

THERE seemed to be a lot of men running around. Speedy sat up and shook his aching head. His bandage was down around his neck, plentifully painted with gore. Men were shaking Speedy, asking him what happened, but Speedy didn't know. At least, he didn't answer their questions.

More men came in, helping Tombstone and the sheriff, who had been badly shaken-up. Neither of them seemed inclined to talk about what happened. Hooty Decker, the hotel keeper, one eye badly swollen, nose scratched, his shirt half-torn from his body, swore that at least seven men attacked him in the hallway.

"I heard that shot!" panted Hooty. "Then I ran up the stairs, and what I ran into! I held my own for a while, but they overpowered me."

"What on earth happened to you, Parke?" asked Rusty.

The sheriff didn't say. He waved a limp wrist, in sort of a futile gesture, and explored a loose tooth with his tongue. Tombstone merely shook his head and said:

"Well, as long as nobody's hurt—"

"Nobody!" howled Hooty. "Look at me, will yuh? Nobody hurt!"

"You ain't hurt," declared Speedy. "Look at me—disfigured for life. Old Disfigured Smith, that's me. I wasn't satisfied with bein' scalped—I had to horn in on a fight in the dark, and git myself mortally wounded."

"I was under the bed, with a gun in my fist," said Tombstone huskily. "I should have stayed there. What sort of a town is this, anyway? Sheriff comes up to our room, busts right in, and after him comes two masked men. They said somethin' about skinnin' a cat. If the sheriff knowed that them two men was after him, why did he lead 'em up to our room? It ain't ethical. I ain't never been so nonplussed in my life before."

"You and the sheriff was both flat on the sidewalk," said one of the men. "How'd you git there?"

"I feel," replied Tombstone, "that I was took there."

The sheriff managed to get to his two feet, but was unsteady. Rusty said, "Parke, what on earth happened?"

"I—I don't exactly know," whispered the sheriff. "I think that somebody went

out the window with me, but I don't know who it was. There were two masked men. Jones fired one shot under the bed, and one man was staggering, when the light went out. Nothin' is exactly clear, after that."

"I—I demand an explanation!" rasped Hooty. "Why, I ain't never been so mistreated in my life, I tell yuh!"

"With seven men jumpin' on yuh, why ask for an explanation?" queried Speedy. "It's easy to understand. Look at me, will yuh? I ain't demandin' anythin'. Old Disfigured Smith is goin' to bed. If you fellers want to talk over yore miseries, go ahead. Mr. Jones, are you goin' to bed?"

"Yeah," replied Tombstone vacantly. "Yeah, I'll do that. I'm so broken in mind and body that a bed will be a luxury. Gents, I give you good-evenin'."

CHAPTER IV

Trouble With A Guardian

TOMBSTONE and Speedy helped each other up the stairs, while the others stood in the lobby and watched them curiously. As they disappeared down the hallway, the sheriff said huskily:

"I don't trust them two, I don't! There's somethin' fishy about this whole thing, I tell yuh. But I'll get to the bottom of it, you can bet on that!"

"The only thing that stopped yuh from gettin' to the bottom this time was the wooden sidewalk," remarked one of the men dryly.

"Ain't nobody goin' to talk sense?" asked Hooty wearily. "This is my hotel and I won't stand for such things, I tell yuh! I go on an errand of mercy, and look what I got!"

"If you went upstairs, Hooty," said one of the men, "how did you get back down here?"

"That's what I've been askin' all evenin'!" husked Hooty. "I—I must have been hit awful hard—some'ers."

Back again in their room, but with the door securely locked this time, Tombstone and Speedy gave each other such first-aid as was available. Speedy looked like a thin-faced Turk, with a turban, one eye swollen, a chip off his chin. The knuckles of his right hand were skinned and swelling, too. Tombstone didn't have too many visible wounds. His left eyebrow was higher than the right, and his nose was skinned a little, but he swore that every bone in his body, every joint, ached like the toothache. He said:

"Yuh don't fall from a second-story window and come up intact. It was terrible, I tell yuh."

"I suffer with yuh, pardner," whispered Speedy. "Yuh know somethin', Tombstone? That telegram to Jim Keaton comes to my mind; when we asked him for a job where we could get hurt bad enough to git a vacation on pay."

"Bless his little heart," groaned Tombstone. "Maybe he knowed."

They were a sorry-looking pair next morning, as they came down the stairs into the lobby. Hooty Decker was standing in the front doorway, humped over, hands resting in the small of his back, as he looked outside. Speedy said:

"Hyah, Kidney Pills."

Hooty limped after them into the restaurant and sat down rather painfully at their table. After which he heaved a deep sigh, he looked them over quizzically.

"Who," he asked, "is goin' to pay for the window in yore room?"

"Maybe the county," suggested Speedy. "That's how the sheriff went out, yuh know."

Hooty felt of his sore jaw as he considered the case against the sheriff. Tombstone said, "There's another angle to this here thing, Hooty. For instance, we was attacked in yore hotel. We pay our good money for a room, and we expect protection. Yore windows are very frail, too. I ain't figurin' on suin' yuh, but I could."

"Suing me?" gasped Hooty. "What for?"

"Bein' assaulted and battered in yore hotel. If I was you, I'd forget the window. Have yuh seen the sheriff this mornin'?"

"The sheriff is in bed, and can't get up —accordin' to Rusty."

"He's a frail critter," said Tombstone.

Hooty said, "Well, I don't mind the window so much but I don't like such things happenin' in my place."

He got up creakingly and went away. They had started eating, when Rusty Gates came in, grinning widely, as he sat

down with them. He said, "How's all the cripples this mornin'?"

"We're fine," lied Speedy. "We heard that the sheriff is sort of in the sere and yaller leaf, as yuh might say."

"Yeah he is, Speedy. Doc says he almost busted his *medullay oblonggatta.*"

"No!" gasped Tombstone. "He did? That's a awful thing to happen to any man."

"What is it?" asked Speedy curiously.

"I don't know," replied Tombstone. "Never heard of it before but it shore sounds awful painful to git busted."

RUSTY accepted a cup of coffee, lighted a cigaret and leaned back in his chair. After a long pause, he said:

"I talked with the sheriff this mornin'. He said, 'Rusty, go and find out who them two fellers are and what business they're in.' Yuh see," Rusty was serious now, "he's worried. He don't know if them masked men was goin' to kill him, or kill you."

"Personally," replied Tombstone, "I don't think they was goin' to be too choosey."

"All right. And now—what is yore business in Westfield?"

Tombstone and Speedy looked at each other thoughtfully for several moments, before Speedy said:

"Well, I reckon it's all right to tell him, Tombstone. After all, it ain't exactly a secret any longer."

"I don't know about that," said Tombstone. "Most all Government work is kinda secret."

"Government?" queried Rusty, interested now. "Go ahead. I can keep a secret."

"Yuh can? That's fine. Well, as a matter of fact, me and Speedy are connected with the Gover'ment as investigators. Been with 'em for years. Our job," Tombstone lowered his voice cautiously, "is to find out if the shade of a mesquite is any heavier and thicker than the shade of a saguero cactus."

"We've been waitin' here for the sun to come out," said Speedy seriously. "We can't work on dark days, yuh know."

Rusty choked over his coffee, clattered the cup back into the saucer and got to his feet.

"I'll explain it to Parke Shevlin," he said, "but I'm afraid he won't believe yuh."

"If he does," remarked Speedy, reaching for another egg, "he's hurt worse than he thinks he is, Rusty."

Rusty Gates left the restaurant. Tombstone ate slowly, thoughtfully, as though he had a weighty problem on his mind. Speedy said:

"What's itchin' you now?"

"I was jist wonderin'."

"Wonderin' what?"

"If there *is* any difference."

"Don't lie yourself into a state of confusion," advised Speedy. "Just stop and remember that two men tried to kill us last night. Only my presence of mind saved us from a awful fate."

"Yours? Huh! Who fell out of bed and took a shot at that masked man's bootheel? Your presence of mind! All you done was throw a piller at the lamp, and then whip the tripe out of poor Hooty."

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Speedy. "Don't advertise it. You don't hear me tellin' that you threw the sheriff through the window and jumped fifteen feet on his back."

"Let's stop braggin' to each other, Speedy. I wish Mary Jones would show up. I'd like to hear her troubles."

"Anythin' to break the monotony of this place," sighed Speedy.

"That's right. If somethin' would only happen. This loafin' in a strange place kinda gets me, Speedy. Mebbe I'm a restless soul, I dunno; but I crave excitement."

They left the hotel and wandered down to the sheriff's office where a team and buckboard was out in front. Rusty Gates was in the office, apparently arguing with a very pretty girl. Beside the doorway was a valise. They stopped outside. Rusty said:

"Well, shucks, I didn't suppose things was like that, Mary."

"That's just what they are, Rusty, and that is why I'm going to the hotel. I'm old enough to know what I want to do. If I want to come here and see Johnny, Len Haslin can't stop me."

They walked to the doorway. Len Haslin and Newt Reno, Haslin's ramrod at the Box 80, came riding in, heading for the Apache Saloon. Rusty said, "Boys, this is Mary Jones. Mary, this is Tomb-

stone Jones and Speedy Smith."

"Mary Jones!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Well, well! I'm glad to meet yuh. Yes, I shore am. Say somethin', Speedy."

"Ditto," replied Speedy soberly.

MARY laughed and started to pick up her valise, but Speedy dived in and took charge of it. Mary said, "Rusty, I'm leaving the team right there. If Len Haslin wants it, he can send in for it."

"All right with me," the grinning Rusty said.

"If yuh're goin' to the hotel, ma'am," said Speedy, "I'll take this valise for yuh."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," Mary said, and smiled.

"Just call me Speedy, ma'am. Well, here we go."

None of them noticed that Haslin and Reno had walked across the street, as Mary, Tombstone and Speedy started for the hotel. Len Haslin's huge bulk blocked the sidewalk, while Reno stood aside, watching curiously. They stopped a few feet from Haslin, who said to Mary, "What's all this about?"

"I have left the ranch," replied Mary firmly, "and I am not going back."

"Oh, yes, yuh are," said Haslin, grinning evilly.

Speedy said, "Oh, no, she ain't."

"Keep yore nose out of this, Half-Pint," growled Haslin. "Mary, you get back in that buckboard."

"You make me!" she snapped angrily. "I don't have to go back, and you can't make me go back, Len Haslin."

"I'll show yuh if I can't!" snapped Haslin, and made a grab at Mary, only to have Tombstone knock his hand aside, while Mary made a quick move and was past him. Reno grinned. He knew Len Haslin very well indeed, and what he knew boded no good for this seven foot string-bean. Haslin was at least seventy-five pounds heavier than Tombstone.

Len Haslin exploded a very profane oath, and Tombstone said:

"Mary, you run along with Speedy, that's a good girl."

Len Haslin was very mad. Through clenched lips he said:

"Monkey with my business, will yuh, you fool!"

Tombstone wasn't exactly unprepared for Haslin's left hook, and it missed Tombstone's jaw by an inch. Haslin's right, aimed at that same jaw, missed by a foot, and threw Haslin off balance. He had never before missed both punches in succession, and in his amazement forgot to protect himself in any way.

Tombstone's counter-punch was like a hunk of lead, swinging on a steel cable, and it landed squarely on Haslin's nose. The men over in front of the Apache heard the thud of that blow. Haslin's knees buckled, his hands dropped helplessly and he went backwards off the foot-high sidewalk, landing on his back.

Speedy was coming back swiftly. Reno reached for his gun, half-drew it from his holster, when Speedy's right hand, the edge of it slashing down against Reno's neck, just below his ear, caused Reno to sway aside, his arm helpless, and he almost fell on top of Haslin, who was trying to get up.

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" exclaimed Speedy.

"My arm's broke!" wailed Reno. "I can't use it!"

"Better not think of tryin' to use it," advised Speedy.

Tombstone stood on the edge of the sidewalk, caressing a sore set of knuckles, as Haslin got to his feet, gore flowing from his nose. He was like a wounded grizzly, hurt, dazed, but willing to fight some more. He shook his head, spattering himself with blood, swayed forward toward Tombstone, and reached for his gun.

Haslin was hurt too badly to make a fast draw, and almost before the gun was out of the holster, Tombstone was off the sidewalk, and had kicked the gun out of Haslin's right hand. Haslin's roar of rage ended when Tombstone's right hand, like a small ham, and twice as hard, hit Haslin squarely on that already busted nose. It was too much for even Len Haslin, who went to sleep, flat on his back in the street. Newt Reno was sitting on the sidewalk, massaging his numb arm, as Tombstone walked away, following Mary and Speedy to the hotel.

"I'm jist scared that yore uncle ain't goin' to smell nothin' for quite a while," said Speedy soberly, as they walked up to the desk.

"I am not at all interested in his sense of smell," said Mary quietly. Hooty Decker had seen the fight from the doorway of

the hotel, and did not ask any questions as to why Mary wanted a room, nor why she had left the ranch. He carried her valise up to the room, while Tombstone and Speedy leaned against the desk. They saw some men taking Haslin and Reno over to the Apache.

TOMBSTONE leaned on the desk and examined his knuckles, which were swelling a little. Speedy said, "I imagine Mr. Haslin is irked."

"He took the first two shots," said Tombstone calmly. "I wonder why Mary Jones left home."

"She wouldn't be bossed by Haslin, that's why."

Hooty came back down the stairs and leaned against the desk, staring at Tombstone Jones. He said, "I saw it with my own eyes, and still I don't believe it. Len Haslin knocked down twice from a punch on the nose! Why, he ain't *never* been licked."

"The horse never lived that couldn't be rode; no rider ever lived that couldn't be throwed," quoted Speedy soberly.

"Yeah, I believe it now," said Hooty, and nodded.

Rusty came over from the Apache, still shaking his head.

"Haslin ain't got no more nose than a fish," he declared. "If he ever smells anythin' again, it'll have to be with his ears."

"He never did smell very good," remarked Hooty.

"I hated to upset everybody," said Tombstone soberly, "but he asked for it. I reckon I'll go find the horse-liniment bottle and doctor up my hand—I may have to hit him again."

Rusty went up to the room with them, while Tombstone doctored his swollen knuckles. Speedy said, "Rusty, tell us somethin' about that SJ spread. How come Len Haslin is runnin' it, and what became of Mary's folks?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh," replied Rusty. "Yuh see, Syl Jones, Mary's father, was found dead in the hills. We think a horse killed him. He was always ridin' a bad horse. His head was battered pretty bad. Mary won't believe he was accidentally killed. She says that somebody was rustlin' their cows. He'd been workin' on it

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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all alone, tryin' to find out who was doin' it. Mary isn't of age; so the judge appointed Len Haslin as her guardian. There was two cowhands at the SJ, but they both quit. Haslin only had Newt Reno and his ranch cook, Old Fresno.

"There ain't a whole lot to do this time of year, so they didn't take on any extra cowpunchers. Johnny Grant owns a little spread south of here, and he don't like the idea of Haslin takin' over things at the SJ. They had words, and Haslin told Johnny to stay away from the SJ.

"Johnny ain't no trouble-maker, but he can take care of himself, if trouble shows up unexpected. Mary said she wrote a letter to the Cattlemen's Association, askin' them for help, but they either didn't get the letter, or didn't bother about it. Anyway, Mary don't like Len Haslin, and she's done quit the ranch. I dunno how it'll come out. Parke Shevlin told me to keep my hands off the whole affair—but I dunno. I like Johnny."

"You kinda like Mary, too, don't yuh?" asked Tombstone.

"Everybody likes her," said Rusty, evading the question.

Tombstone dried his hand on the towel and sat down on the bed.

"Yuh know, Rusty, it's easy to say that somebody is stealin' cows, but it ain't so easy to prove. You've got to find out how it's done. You can't just take a cow and sell it."

"I know," nodded Rusty. "Me and Parke have tried to figure it out, but we don't get anywhere."

Speedy was looking out the window, and he said: "There goes Haslin and Reno, pullin' out. Haslin's got a handkerchief tied around his face. There's the sheriff over on the porch of the Apache. I reckon he got here too late to see the downfall of Len Haslin."

"He prob'ly won't believe it," said Rusty. "It's hard to believe, as far as that goes. Tombstone, where on earth do yuh get a punch like that?"

"Aw," grinned Tombstone, "I just kinda wind up and let it fly. I ain't no fist-fighter, Rusty. Shucks, anybody ort to whip me, if they hit me first."

"I'd advise jist that—and with a meat-cleaver," said Rusty.

"I don't expect that Mr. Haslin will hanker for any more fights, until his nose takes root again," remarked Speedy.

"Root!" snorted Rusty. "He ain't even got a root left."

Tombstone and Speedy did not go over to the Apache that evening. Tombstone's right hand was painfully swollen, and he decided to play safe. He said, "I couldn't even shoot a gun, much less pop somebody with that fist."

"Yuh know," remarked Speedy, "yuh're almost as safe, workin' on a dangerous case as yuh are, loafin' around like this."

"Almost," agreed Tombstone. "Maybe tomorrow we can get a chance to talk things over with Mary Jones, and see what her problem is."

CHAPTER V

Six-Gun Hospitality

NEXT morning Tombstone's right hand was usable again, but they didn't get a chance to see Mary Jones. Hooty Decker told them that Mary had gone to spend the morning with some lady, who lived a short distance away. Tombstone was restless. He said:

"Let's go wanderin' around, huh? We ain't seen any of the country, and we need fresh air."

"My legs don't feel like bein' wrapped around a horse, but they'll work loose, I reckon," said Speedy. "Where'll we go?"

"Some'ers," replied Tombstone, as they headed for the feed corral. "Yuh see, I'm kinda interested in them SJ cows. As long as we ain't got nothin' definite to work upon, we might as well be enjoyin' our vacation."

They rode out of Westfield and headed into the hills. Both of them were stiff and sore, but took it easy. For an hour or so they drifted aimlessly, stopping now and then to examine brands; mostly SJ and Box 80.

It was about noontime when they dropped down through a swale and came out at a ranchhouse, a weathered group of old buildings, corrals in need of repair, a sway-backed stable. A few mongrel chickens pecked around the yard, some

cattle loafed in the shade of a cottonwood beside a creaking windmill.

They dismounted and walked over to the open kitchen doorway. The cook was mixing bread, his back to them, but he whirled quickly, as their footsteps sounded on the wooden steps. He was short and fat, frowsy, a dirty flour-sack tied around his middle. His eyes snapped wide at sight of them. Both Tombstone and Speedy noticed that he was wearing a holstered gun, which was unusual for a cook, working in his kitchen. After a moment or two, he said:

"For a minute, yuh scared me. C'mon on in, gents; and I'll put on some coffee."

He led the way into the main room, lifted a big, gray cat from the middle of an easy chair, and tossed it aside.

"Set down," he said pleasantly. "I'll have a snack for yuh in no time."

"Well, thank yuh," said Tombstone, "but don't go to any trouble. We had breakfast late and—oh-oh!"

The very pleasant cook was covering them with his six-shooter, a crooked grin on his heavy lips. He said, "Jist take it easy, boys, and nobody gets blasted. High-Pockets, you slide yore gun loose, easy-like and toss it over to me."

Tombstone obeyed the order. Slowly he lifted his gun loose, twisted his wrist, snapped it up quickly, and the heavy gun went spinning squarely into the face of the cook. It was all done so quickly that the man had no chance to dodge, taking the heavy gun squarely in the mouth and nose.

The gun had no more than landed, when Speedy dived ahead, hit the cook just at the knees, and fairly turned him over in the air. The cook's gun went flying, and Tombstone scooped it up.

Speedy wasn't satisfied with merely disarming the cook; he proceeded to put a toe-hold on the man, who howled with pain.

The flour-sack apron came in handy. Tombstone tore it into strips and proceeded to tie the cook very securely, after which they dumped him into a chair and tied him to it. The cook's lips were bleeding, and he cursed them back several generations. After the bonds were to the entire satisfaction of Speedy, he told the cook, "We're ridin' on—and thanks for yore hospitality. Maybe we'll be back past here, long about dark—and if nobody has turned yuh loose—maybe we will. It'll all depend on how you've repented of yore sins. Mind tellin' us who owns this rancho?"

What the cook told them had no relation to ownership of any ranch. When he finished, Tombstone said, "You ort to be ashamed—usin' words like that. For two cents I'd wash yore mouth out with soap."

"I'll do it for nothin'—and thanks for the idea," said Speedy, who was grinning. He hurried into the kitchen, coming back with a dirty dish-rag and a bar of very yellow soap.

THE washing was very complete—with no rinsing, and they left the cook, very dejected, half-sick, and with suds dripping off his lips.

They got on their horses and rode back into the hills. Tombstone said, "Well, at least, it was a di-version, Speedy. The gall of that pot-wrangler pullin' a gun on us!"

"That's right. Why, he don't even know us. Yuh know somethin'? That *pelicano* had 'shoot' in his eyes."

"He shore did. Western hospitality!"

"Come to think of it, he was a bit high-handed. Yuh know, yuh get so after while that yuh don't trust anybody."

They drifted on into the hills, until the valley was a blue haze below them, before starting down again, angling through the brush and rocks. It was late in the afternoon, when they reached a ravine, where they followed a cattle-trail through the brush, coming finally into a five-acre opening, probably an old burn.

At the lower end of the open space they saw a spotted cow, acting strangely, ducking in and out of the brush. Tombstone stood up in his stirrups, sniffing at the faint breeze. He said:

"Smelled like burnin' hair."

"That spotted cow is hot enough to start burning'," declared Speedy. "He-e-ey! She's plumb loco! Look out for her!"

The cow threw up her head, bawled dismally, and came straight for them. They spurred apart swiftly, and the cow couldn't seem to decide which one to attack. She swung her head from side to side, ignoring both riders, and suddenly went galloping back where she came from, crashing back through the brush.

Tombstone said, "Speedy, I'll betcha forty dollars against a doughnut that somethin' is hurtin' her calf. She's—"

At that exact moment Speedy's saddle horn was struck a terrific blow, and the whistling whine of a ricocheting bullet was drowned in the rattling report of a 30-30. Another bullet tugged at Speedy's sleeve, as he swung low in the saddle, racing for the cover of the brush. Tombstone saw the flash of a colored shirt, and snapped two shots at it, before following Speedy.

The brush wasn't high enough to conceal a rider; so both men dismounted quickly. Speedy was swearing bitterly.

"Look at my saddle-horn, will yuh?" he complained. "The blamed thing is pointin' toward the ground. My, my, I almost got that one in my abbydomen. Where are them dry-gulchers?"

A bullet slashed a mesquite top and dropped it on Tombstone's hat. He said, "They're over thataway, I reckon."

Powee-e-e-e! Another bullet came too close for comfort.

"They was range-brandin' that cow's offspring," said Tombstone. "No wonder the old lady was on the prod. I wish I had a rifle."

"I wish I had wings," said Speedy mournfully.

"Mebbe you'll get yore druthers," said Tombstone. "They know where we are and if we move in this brush."

"I've got me a cravin' to git out of here," declared Speedy. "and when I start cravin', I move."

"Better hold yore cravin' to minimum, pardner. They've got a thirty-thirty—but they ain't so good in the brush."

"Good enough to goose-pimple me somethin' awful. Take a look and see what's over there."

Tombstone was just simple enough to do that. His hat snapped off his head, a neat hole drilled in the crown. He said:

"They're over where I thought they was—too far for a forty-five, the dirty cowards. Yuh can't trust anybody."

"How many of 'em, Tombstone?"

"What do yuh think I was doin', when I lifted my head—keepin' books? One is enough."

Speedy slid further ahead, found a section of dry mesquite, put his hat on it and lifted it carefully above the brush. There was no response. Tombstone said, "They've pulled out!"

"Yeah? I'll believe that later—I hope. Right now I'm goin' to lie on the back of my neck and have a cigarette. If we can't get out, it's a cinch they can't come and get us."

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it? They'd make too much noise in the brush. Might as well make 'em come to us, unless it takes too blamed long. Gimme yore papers, will yuh?"

RUSTY Gates was unable to find Tombstone and Speedy, and his inquiries netted him little information. Their horses and riding rigs were gone from the feed corral. Hooty Decker told Rusty:

"This mornin' they was askin' about Mary Jones, and I told 'em she had gone to spend the day with Mrs. Rand. I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em since then."

Parke Shevlin didn't share Rusty's concern regarding their whereabouts. He said, "If they never come back, it'll never worry me a bit. Good riddance, I'd say. Measurin' and weighin' shadows!"

Late that afternoon Mary Jones came down to the office, where only Rusty was in attendance. Mary didn't come down to see Johnny Grant, but she did want to ask a favor. She said:

"Rusty, I've simply got to go out to the ranch for more clothes. I haven't any way to get out there—and I'm afraid to go alone."

"Why, shore!" exclaimed Rusty. "I'll get the sheriff's horse and buggy, and I'll take yuh out there. You ain't scared of Len Haslin, are yuh?"

"No, I'm not, Rusty, but it might be embarrassing."

"I know what yuh mean, Mary; I'll hitch up the buggy-horse."

After another half-hour in the brush, Tombstone and Speedy again tried to draw the fire of the attacking force, but without any results. Satisfied that the men had left, they mounted and rode back to the open flat. There were several head of cattle in the opening, and among them was the spotted cow and her calf.

Tombstone took down his rope and quickly built a loop. The old cow got angry again, but Speedy rode her off, while Tombstone roped the calf, went

down the rope and flanked the animal. The calf had been freshly branded with the Box 80, and the mother's brand was undeniably the SJ.

"That means," said Speedy grimly, "that the Box Eighty is stealin' the SJ calves."

Tombstone wiped the sweat off his brow and marked in the sand with a mesquite snag. It was a simple matter to make an eight out of the S, and to complete the J to an O. Tombstone said:

"Then yuh draw a box around it—and it's a Box Eighty. They didn't have to alter this'n—they got ahead of the SJ."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Speedy. "Now, all we've got to do is to live long enough to tell the law about it."

"Live long enough?"

"Listen, knot-head, we ain't out of this yet. Them rustlers showed their hand. They know that we'd find that cow and calf. What do yuh expect 'em to do—go in and give themselves up? If we get back to Westfield with whole skins, we'll be lucky."

"Well, yeah, mebbe yuh're right. Let's go."

Neither of them knew the best route down into the valley and the road to Westfield. They did not hurry, but kept alert, riding high in their stirrups, watching everything ahead of them. It was a slow process, but they finally struck the flat lands of the valley. To their left was a huge blow-out, where the rocks were piled as high as a ten-story building, filled in between with brush.

Below the blow-out, twisting in and out of the brush, was a well-traveled road. Speedy said, "We go to the right, headin' for Westfield."

"Yeah, I think so," agreed Tombstone. "At least, I'd say it was some'ers in that direction."

They cut into the road, swung their horses to the right, when a bullet slashed along Speedy's gun-belt on the right side, and neatly took away two loops and two forty-five shells. Swiftly they whirled their horses to the left, and raced away along the base of the old blowout, while bullets hissed past them. Tombstone's horse was the faster of the two, and Tombstone didn't see Speedy's horse break down, turn a complete somersault and come down with a crash, throwing the luckless Speedy into the brush. The road made a sharp left-hand turn, and Tombstone only looked back, after making the turn, and discovered that Speedy was not with him.

As he drew up sharply, a bullet furrowed lightly across his right shoulder, indicating that he and Speedy were between two fires. There was no time to go back and look for Speedy, so he dived off his horse, slid into the brush and began making his way up along the side of the blowout, while bullets whined off the rocks around him. But Tombstone was able to get under cover quickly, where he could easily match his six-gun against a rifle.

For a while there was no more shooting. Tombstone was unable to see the road. He climbed higher, trying to find a place where he could see what was going on down there, and a bullet blew rock-dust into his face.

CHAPTER VI

Battle on the Range

RUSTY and Mary Jones were late getting started from town, and Rusty was driving a horse which hadn't been broken too long. They went past the Box Eighty ranch in a cloud of dust, bowled on for about a mile, with Rusty trying to hold the horse down to a moderate pace. The road was narrow, twisting, and Rusty had no liking for meeting another vehicle—not with his horse at top speed.

It was getting dark, as they rattled around the base of the big blowout, and suddenly their horse leaped wildly aside, cramping the front wheels sharply. Another lurch and a front wheel hit a rock just off the road.

Both Mary and Rusty were thrown free, before the buggy upset. Rusty limped out of some low brush and went to Mary, who was sitting up in the road, nursing a badly sprained ankle. Otherwise she was not hurt much. Mary panted:

"That was a dead horse in the road. I saw the saddle on it, just as we were wrecked. Rusty, you better see!"

"Are you all right?" he asked weakly.

"Except for this ankle, I've only been sandpapered," she replied. "You go ahead, Rusty."

Rusty found the dead horse, looked it over and came back to Mary.

"It's Speedy Smith's horse and saddle," he told her. "The horse has been shot."

Rusty looked at her helplessly. The buggy was smashed, horse gone. He stood there in the half-light and stared back up the road, trying to remember how far it was to the Box 80.

"What are we going to do?" asked Mary. "I can't walk on this foot."

"And I can't leave you here alone, while I get help," declared Rusty. "Mary, the only thing I can do is to carry you back to the Box Eighty. It's only about a mile."

"Rusty, you can't carry me that far. I'm too heavy."

"Well, I can try. At least, we can make it—by degrees."

They had gone about two hundred yards, when a fusillade of shots rattled the hills, seeming to come from somewhere above them on the big blowout. It was easily evident that the shots were not fired at them, so Rusty picked Mary up again and went on. Mary was suffering, but she gritted her teeth. She said:

"This is the wrong way, Rusty; carry me piggy-back."

"Yeah, I think you've got the idea," applauded Rusty. "We'll make it easy now."

Speedy Smith wasn't enjoying the evening at all. He awoke in the brush, his hands and legs tied tightly. And the worst of it was, he had no idea who had tied him. The fall from his dying horse had knocked him completely out. He could feel the sticky blood on his face, and guessed that his scalp-wound had torn open again. It was impossible, tied as he was, to determine just how badly he was hurt. He did know that when he moved his head from side to side, the whole landscape turned over.

"I reckon I better take it easy, until every precinct has been heard from," he muttered aloud. "Yuh never know whether yuh're elected or not, until the whole vote is counted."

Then Speedy heard the crash of the buggy, but had no idea what it was, being buried pretty deep in the brush. He wondered what became of Tombstone Jones. He heard shots fired, and they didn't seem very far away. Some time later he heard voices, the crashing of brush, as men came toward him. One voice said:

"Yeah, but we don't *know* we got him. Blast his soul, he can hit a gnat's eyebrow at a hundred feet! Shot the gun out of my hand at that distance, didn't he? I still can't feel anythin' in it."

"All right, all right! Shut up!" snapped another voice. "No use harpin' on it. I tell yuh, we got him—but nobody but a fool would try to prove it tonight."

"Yeah, and another thing—he's awful close to that cave."

"Well, what if he is? It's dark, ain't it. Anyway, he's dead."

The two men reached Speedy. One of them booted him in the ribs, but Speedy kept his jaw tight. One man swore viciously, but the other one said, "All right, he's still dead to the world. Grab his feet, will yuh; we'll tie him on the horse."

And poor Speedy was as limp as a rag, as they carried him away.

TO Rusty Gates, that mile carry was both pleasant and painful. Having been shaken badly in the wreck, his muscles wailed for rest, long before he came up to the ranchhouse. There was no light in the house, but the door was unlocked. He left Mary on the steps, while he went in and lighted a lamp. Then he saw Old Fresno, the cook, all tied up neatly and fastened to the chair.

"What on earth happened to you, Fresno?" he asked.

"Two masked men," husked the cook. "They sneaked in on me. One of 'em hit me in the face, and then they tied me up here."

"Masked men?" queried Rusty. "Who on earth were they?"

"I dunno," lied Fresno, as Rusty cut away the flour-sack strips. "They never gave me a chance. I'm shore glad you showed up, Rusty."

Rusty helped Mary into the house, and Fresno told his story all over again for her benefit. Mary relaxed in the chair, her face a little white from the pain, while Rusty removed her shoe.

"You better git her to a doctor," advised Fresno.

"Yeah, I'm goin' to do that," said Rusty with a nod.

"What happened to you?" asked Fresno.

Rusty told him about the dead horse in the road, and what happened to them and their buggy.

"Dead horse?" queried the cook, as he found his gun, which Tombstone had tossed aside. "Whose horse, Rusty?"

"I think it belonged to Speedy Smith."

"Speedy Smith? I don't know him, do I?"

"I guess not. Well," Rusty looked around, flexing his tired arms, "if yuh don't mind, Fresno, we'll take a team and buckboard to Westfield."

"Shore, shore! Go right ahead. You'll find—"

Footsteps rattled on the rickety front porch, the door banged open, and Speedy Smith was almost thrown into the room. He stumbled just inside the doorway and went sprawling, while right behind him came Len Haslin and Newt Reno. The two men stopped short, staring at Mary Jones and Rusty Gates, who were looking down at the sprawling Speedy Smith. When Rusty looked up, he was staring into the muzzle of Len Haslin's six-shooter.

"Get his gun, Fresno," rasped Haslin, and Fresno obeyed. Haslin said, "Set down, Rusty!"

"What's this all about?" asked Rusty, after sitting down.

Reno said, "Where'd they come from, Fresno?"

"I'll tell it," said Rusty. "I was takin' Mary out to the ranch in a buggy, and we almost ran over a dead horse in the road. My horse shied and upset the buggy. Mary's ankle was hurt, so we came here to get transportation back to town. Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

Haslin swore under his breath. He was not a pretty sight. His nose was still flat, inflamed, swollen. One eye purple. The rest of his face was dirty, and he had a deep scratch across his left cheek, where a mesquite thorn had ripped. Reno had one blood-stained hand, torn clothes, numerous scratches across his face.

Speedy Smith's head and face were caked with dried blood, his knuckles scraped raw, one sleeve gone from his shirt. He managed to sit up on the floor, one shoulder braced against the leg of the table. Rusty noticed that Haslin had the extra gun shoved inside the waistband of his overalls.

"Fine break!" whispered Reno.

"What happened to yore face, Fresno?" asked Haslin coldly.

"Happened?" The cook laughed shortly. "I was makin' bread when this skinny whippoorwill and his pardner sneaked in on me. But I got the drop on 'em. I told the tall one to toss me his gun—and he hit me in the face with it. I've been tied up here, until Rusty and the girl came along a few minutes ago and cut me loose from the chair."

LEN HASLIN glared at the cook, his bloodshot eyes aflame, his jaw jutting.

"So Jones and Smith were here, eh?"

"Yeah, I'll say they was, Len."

"Two masked men, eh?" commented Rusty.

"You didn't expect me to tell yuh the truth, didja?" flared Fresno.

"Get some ropes, Fresno," ordered Haslin, "and then you and Reno tie up these two. We've got to have time to figure out our next move."

"Why should we be tied up?" asked Rusty.

"You don't think I'm a fool, do yuh?" asked Haslin.

Fresno came in with the ropes. Rusty asked Haslin:

"Where is Tombstone Jones?"

"He's dead," replied Haslin. His voice sounded like that of a man suffering from a bad head-cold.

"Dead, eh?" said Rusty quietly.

"I'm bettin' six-two-and even, that yuh're a liar, Haslin," said Speedy painfully. "I hear you and Reno talkin' about it. Yuh're guessin'—and hopin'. Neither of yuh had sand enough to go up in those rocks and make sure of it."

Reno kicked Speedy in the abdomen, and he slid away from the table-leg, face down. Rusty said, "Brave man."

Haslin whirled and glared at Rusty. "One more remark out of you, and you'll get the same dose!" he snarled. He turned to Reno and said, "Come out in the kitchen and we'll do some talkin'. Fresno, you keep an eye on 'em."

Tombstone Jones, far from being dead, was not enjoying things too much. His

eyes smarted from rock-dust, the point of his left shoulder ached from a bullet-scrape, and most of the skin was off his left shin. That had happened when he tripped and fell over some loose rocks, and that was also when the shooting had stopped. Tombstone decided that the attackers thought he was dead; so he stayed down and waited for them to come up and discover what a mistake they had made.

But they didn't come. After a while Tombstone began looking for a way to get down off the blow-out. There was a trace of moonlight over the main divide, and the starlight was getting brighter now. But, even with some illumination, it was dangerous work. He slid off a boulder and stopped. Just beside him was an opening, larger than a man-made tunnel, almost concealed in the brush.

Tombstone didn't like caves, but something impelled him to go into this one. It wasn't a big cave, the floor nearly flat. From the entrance it angled sharply to the right, and was roughly twenty feet by thirty feet, the ceiling varying in heights, from five to ten feet. The lighted match in Tombstone's fingers showed something against the wall. Slowly he went over there, lighting an extra match, before he pulled the old tarpaulin off the thing.

He dropped the tarpaulin quickly, but not until he had seen the dead face of the same man he and Speedy had found in the old shack. Tombstone Jones didn't like dead men. In fact, his legs yelled, "Run!", but he stayed and lighted another match.

"So they stole yuh in the shack and brung yuh here, huh?" he said aloud. "Tried to make a liar out of me, huh? Well, mister, no one can ever say that Tombstone Jones lost his man twice."

He wrapped the tarpaulin around the body, picked it up and half-dragged it to the entrance, where he hoisted it to his shoulder. The body was so stiff that it was like balancing a plank on his shoulder, but he found sort of a trail, which led to the bottom of the blow-out, where he found the road.

He was crashing through low brush, when he heard a horse nicker.

"This," declared Tombstone aloud," is like hittin' the Double O."

Fifty feet off the road, its reins tangled in the brush, was Tombstone's horse. He loosed the reins and led the animal back to where he had left the body.

"Pardner," he said to the body, "you prob'ly ain't never rode a horse horizontal-like before, but that's what'll be yore best bet."

THE situation at the Box Eighty ranchhouse had not improved, except that Speedy had recovered from the kick, and was being given a third-degree by Haslin and Reno. Speedy said:

"Yuh're talkin' about somethin' I don't *sabe*. What money?"

"Don't lie, you little shrimp!" snapped Haslin. "Wagner was packin' the money we got from the Apache. You found him at that old shack and you two got the money. Now, don't lie. Wagner was dyin' from the bullet he got in the holdup."

"So," remarked Speedy, "Johnny Grant didn't pull that job."

"You mean—Johnny is innocent?" gasped Mary.

"A lot of good that'll do you," said Haslin. "What we want is that money—and Smith is goin' to talk. Fresno! Get the pliers. They tell me that when yuh pull fingernails loose, the owner will talk plenty."

Fresno left the room. Reno said, "If we can get that money, we'll pull out for Mexico—with some money, anyway."

"You can run if yuh want to, but I'm stayin'," declared Haslin. "I'm no coward. When we knocked off Syl Jones, I knew what I was doin'. With this smart young lady out of the way, the law will give me the SJ."

"After you already rustled most of the SJ cows?" asked Speedy.

"Yea-a-ah?" sneered Haslin. "And how can yuh prove that?"

"By the use of a runnin'-iron, Haslin. Yuh make an eight out of the S, fill up the J and make it an O—and draw a Box around it. Both outfits brand on the same spot."

"Smart!" Haslin grinned. "Yuh're gc in' to die with a lot of valuable information—untold."

"You murdered my father!" accused Mary hoarsely.

"What of it?" snarled Haslin. "He stood in my way, just like you. If you'd had any brains you'd have stayed at the ranch.

Bein' a fool kinda runs in the Jones family."

"All right," said Reno, "you can do as you please, Len. All I want is enough money to last me a while and an open road to the Border."

Haslin turned and glared at Reno. "What are you scared of?" he asked. "There won't be anybody left to tell about it."

Reno drew a deep breath and shook his head. "I helped yuh bump off Syl Jones," he said slowly. "You killed him, but I was with yuh. I kinda balk at any more killin', Len."

"All right," sneered Haslin, "I'll do it, and you can hide yore head. Where's Fresno? Does it take that long to find a pair of pliers?"

"They're down at the stable," said Reno. "I wish I knew that Jones is dead."

"He ain't," declared Speedy. "You can bet a thousand to one that he's alive."

"Yeah?" said Haslin.

"Bullet proof, eh?"

"Wait and see."

"Haslin, you can't get away with a deal like this," said Rusty Gates. "Parke Shevlin already suspects yuh. He said he did."

"Now, I know yuh're lyin'!" rasped Haslin. "If he suspected—what do yuh mean?"

Rusty stared stonily at Haslin, but did not answer him. Reno said, "If I had enough money—Haslin, ain't you got any here?"

"Oh, yuh want to run away and leave me flat, eh?"

"We might both be flat, Len. If the sheriff suspects."

"He don't! Rusty is lyin'. Shevlin is as dumb as—as Tombstone Jones."

Speedy laughed aloud and Haslin stared down at him, swearing under his breath. Then he whirled and said:

"Where's that blasted Fresno and the pliers?"

Fresno had gone out through the kitchen doorway, but they heard him at the front door, fumbling with the lock. Reno stepped over to the door, snapped the lock and opened the door. Then he yelled

[*Turn page*]

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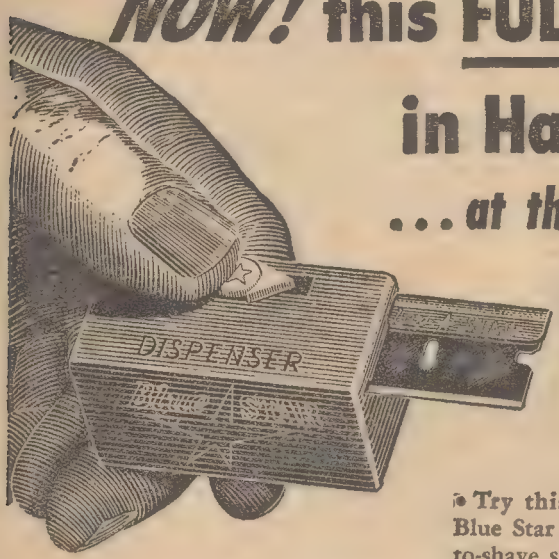

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and sprang backwards. The body of a man was falling into the room, stiffly, slowly, thudding down, the face-up.

HASLIN sprang forward, stopped short, staring at the body of Wagner. He was unnerved, dazed, his hands hanging at his sides, when Tombstone Jones' voice from behind them, said quietly: "Kinda purty, ain't he?"

Len Haslin whirled, like a trapped wolf, his right hand streaking for his gun, but Tombstone's forty-five rattled the walls of the ranchhouse, and the gun fell from Haslin's nerveless fingers. He still stood there, staring straight ahead, but unable to move. Reno, his nerve entirely gone, sprang past Haslin, attempting to go through the doorway, but caught a toe under the dead man's leg, and went into the side of the doorway with a crash.

"That's usin' the old head," remarked Speedy. He lifted his legs, slammed them against Haslin, who went over like a ten-pin.

"Tombstone Jones!" exclaimed Mary. "You—they said you were dead."

"Only half-right," grinned Tombstone, as he began to unrope them. Rusty said, "Look out, Tombstone. Old Fresno is outside somewhere, and he's as bad as the rest."

"Old Fresno," panted Tombstone, "ain't interested. I found him playin' in a toolbox down at the stable. He's still there, but he ain't interested in tools. It's shore funny how a little pat on the head changes a man's ideas. How are yuh, Speedy?"

"Barrin' a loose scalp and some busted ribs, I'm swell. Quite an evenin' we had. You've got a awful bloody shirt yourself."

"Aw, I just got nicked."

"Tombstone, you don't know what happened!" exclaimed Mary. "Len Haslin admitted that he murdered my father! He admitted that he and Reno and Wagner robbed the Apache—and Johnny is innocent. And they've altered our brand to the Box Eighty!"

Tombstone sat down and tried to roll a cigarette, but his fingers didn't work well, so Rusty rolled it for him.

"I'd love to do it," said Speedy, "but I couldn't roll a drum."

"We've got to get the sheriff!" exclaimed Rusty. "I—I forgot all about bein' a deputy sheriff."

"Yuh know," grinned Tombstone weakly, as he puffed on the limp cigarette, "I plumb forgot about bein' a detective, too."

"Detective?" asked Mary. "You—you are a detective?"

"Yes'm, I'm prob'ly the best there is—and Speedy is my helper. Did you want to say somethin' more, Rusty?"

"No, I—well, go ahead," said Rusty weakly. "You were sayin'?"

"Well, maybe it's time we said somethin'," continued Tombstone. "Yuh see, Mary, Jim Keaton got yore letter all safe. So he sent us down here. But things wasn't jist right for us to see yuh; so we had to wait for the chance to talk with yuh. Jim said that we was to see you, and—well, now we've got to a point where we can admit who we are. If you'll tell us what you want done, me and Speedy will shore try and do it for yuh."

"We won't only try, ma'am—we'll do it," added Speedy.

After a long pause, Rusty said quietly: "If you don't mind, I'll take yore horse, Tombstone—and get the sheriff."

"Wait a minute!" said Speedy. "Tombstone, them fellers accused me and you of gettin' that money they stole from the Apache. Len Haslin said that Wagner had the loot with him. But he didn't have no money with him in the shack."

"Wait a minute!" blurted Tombstone. "Rusty, you and the sheriff take a look in the brush beside that busted gate. When Wagner's horse hit mine, somethin', flyin' through the air, hit me on the head. I'll betcha that was the money. It's there in the brush."

Rusty looked closely at Tombstone, as he said: "Tombstone, is there anythin' you *don't* know?"

"Well, there is now, but as soon as I ask Mary what she wanted of the association."

"We'll know it all then," said Speedy proudly.

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Next Issue: TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY in HORSE-SHOE LUCK

Ride Your Hunch, Ranger!

Howling, Red Franklin fell back

Where there's no smoke there's a clue that leads a Frontier lawman to a band of thieving killers!

A DOG barked and the sound seemed unusually loud along Red Fork's main drag. A hidden man yelled harshly at the dog. Sheriff Mel Clark, cursing both the man and the dog, stepped across his small office to peer out the front door.

"The dumb, meddlin' fools!" the sheriff burst out. "Raine, there ain't a horse or rig in sight along the street, not a human bein' stirrin' along the walks. Ben Yarbo will never ride in."

The angular, graying sheriff turned, his black eyes stabbing at big, powerfully built Navajo Tom Raine, Arizona Territorial Ranger. Raine stood against the wall, relaxed and at ease. A window beside him spilled in light that touched his

A Navajo Raine Story by JACKSON COLE

hawkish brown face—a face framed by thick black hair that was cropped off just enough to keep the ends from touching his powerful shoulders. There was a string of turquoise-set silver ornaments around the crown of Raine's Stetson that caught the light from the window, and the grips of matched six-shooters on his muscular thighs were of flawless turquoise, obviously the work of skilled Navajo hands.

"Ben Yarbo is one of the cagiest and most dangerous gunmen in the Territory, Mel," Raine said quietly. "When that woodcutter, Todd Blanchard, came in yesterday claimin' Ben Yarbo sent word that he'd ride in at sunup this mornin' and hand you his guns, I told you there was somethin' fishy about the whole thing."

"All right, quit beefin' about it, will you?" the sheriff snapped peevishly.

"I'm not beefin' about any part of this setup, Mel," Raine said patiently. "But I am uneasy about those townsmen being hidden along the street, with artillery enough to whip an army."

"That bunch of smart Alecs needn't worry you!" the sheriff gritted. "I'll be rawhided plumb unmerciful when them galoots twist the facts around to make it look like I wanted them to hide out along this street with guns. Blamed if I don't almost wish Ben Yarbo and his hellions would come tearin' into town this mornin', Tom."

"Ben Yarbo will ride into this street, but he'll be alone, as he sent word he would," Raine said slowly. "And that's why those townsmen hidin' out there worry me, Mel. If they shoot Ben Yarbo down they'll be in a peck of trouble, for the law hasn't one iota of proof that Yarbo is a cold-blooded killer and thief."

"What in blue blazes are you talkin' about, Tom?" the sheriff cried.

"Call it a hunch, since I've got no better name for it," Raine said quietly. "But somethin' tells me Ben Yarbo will be here, and that he'll hand you his guns."

"You must have been fed a lot of peyote by them Navajos that raised you after your famous daddy, Marshal Powder Raine, was bushwhacked durin' the Tonto Basin war," the sheriff groaned.

"Ben Yarbo is up to somethin', Mel," Raine said sharply. "You can bet his comin' here to surrender is part of some well-planned scheme. Anyhow, that's the hunch I'm ridin'."

"I wish you'd straddle that blamed hunch and ride it clean out of my bailiwick," the sheriff hooted.

"I wouldn't be here if you hadn't written to Burt Mossman, captain and organizer of the Arizona Rangers, askin' us to help you," Raine reminded bluntly.

"Now, Tom," the sheriff said hastily. "Shucks, I didn't mean nothin' personal. If you ain't got nothin' better than a hunch to work on, you just go right ahead and ride your hunch, Ranger."

"Thanks," Raine said drily. "I generally ride my hunches, at that."

"And no harm comes from it, I guess." The sheriff laughed drily. "But ten will get you fifty, Tom, that this hunch of yours about Ben Yarbo aimin' to come here this mornin' and hand me his guns ain't worth the ridin'."

"I could use fifty, and ought to call that bet," Raine grinned. "But callin' you now would be cheatin', for I see Ben Yarbo ridin' into the east end of the street, yonder."

"What?" the sheriff bleated, and dashed to the door.

BEN YARBO was there, tall and lean and somehow sinister looking, although he rode quietly along, holding a mettlesome black stallion down to a walk. Yarbo was towheaded and beak-nosed, and had a pair of tawny eyes that were raking the too silent street in cold contempt. A pair of shell-studded belts that supported ivory-gripped six-shooters dangled from Yarbo's saddle horn, and a kind of low droning sound that was the muttering of excited men ran through the street as this fact was noted. Hearing this sound, Yarbo's gash-thin lips quirked in a sneering grin.

"I expected some such stupid trick as this from you, Clark," his voice lashed out.

"Up here, Yarbo," Sheriff Mel Clark called from his office doorway. "Don't blame me for that bunch of chowderheads bein' hunkered down along the street with guns in their fists."

"Come get these guns off my saddle, Clark," Ben Yarbo said flatly. "Then I'll step down, and you can lock me up."

"I don't lock any man up, Yarbo, unless I've got some kind of charge to put against him," the sheriff said stiffly.

"You sound as stupid as you look," Yarbo taunted. "I came here to demand protection, and the only way I can have full protection is to be locked in your jail for the next twenty-four hours."

"Put your cards on the table, Yarbo, and I'll decide whether or not you need the protection you're askin'," the sheriff said.

Because of his position in the room, Navajo Raine could not see Ben Yarbo, who sat his horse outside. But the Ranger heard Yarbo curse wrathfully, and saw Sheriff Mel Clark crouch, throw up both hands as if to ward off a blow. The next instant the sheriff was toppling backwards, bowled clean off his feet by a brace of shell-studded belts and holstered six-shooters that had come slamming against his face and chest.

"Stall around, would you?" Ben Yarbo was saying harshly. "All right, Clark, that suits me fine. I'll give you a beatin'. A charge of assault and battery ought to keep me in your jail a while, eh?"

Navajo Raine was gliding across the sheriff's office, green eyes as bright and shiny as glass. The sheriff got up, wiping dazedly at a bleeding cut on one cheek. Ben Yarbo stepped through the door, grinning wolfishly as he reached out a long arm to seize the still dazed sheriff's shirt front.

"Right in your teeth, this time," he chuckled. "After I've knocked a couple of your fangs loose, I'll boot you outside, so the townies can see you get a whippin', Clark. You'll want witness to swear—Hey, what the devil!"

Ben Yarbo's growl ended on a note of alarm. Wearing moccasins instead of boots, Navajo Raine had come across the shadowy office like a puma pouncing on unsuspecting prey. The big Ranger's left hand streaked out, sinewy fingers sinking like talons into the muscles of Yarbo's right.

"Tom Raine!" Ben Yarbo exclaimed.

He swung a vicious left hook, cursing thickly when Raine bobbed his head aside and let the fist slide past his ear. Raine released his hold on the gunman's arm then, stepping clear before Yarbo could launch another attack.

"What's the idea hornin' into somethin' that's none of your business, Tom?" Yarbo glared at the Ranger.

"Ben, I've known you since we were both just kids," Raine said calmly. "You never were anything but a swaggerin', loud-mouthed show-off. Beatin' up smaller men, the way you were just now startin' to beat up Mel Clark, has always been your specialty."

"All right, now," Sheriff Mel Clark put in suddenly. "Tom, quit squabblin' with this hellion. And you, Yarbo, start sayin' why you want to be locked in my jail."

The sheriff glanced uneasily at the open door and the three windows in his office walls. The door and windows were jammed with wide-eyed townsmen, who were watching and listening silently. Ben Yarbo glanced at the interested spectators, too, his thin mouth kinking sardonically.

"Run these nosy yokels off, Clark, and bounce this Raine galoot out of here," Yarbo said airily.

"These citizens are free to stay here if they want to," the sheriff snapped peevishly. "Since Tom Raine is an Arizona Ranger, I couldn't run him out of here even if I wanted to."

"Ranger?" Ben Yarbo bleated.

He whirled on Raine, a hard gleam of alarm in his yellow eyes. Yarbo opened his mouth as if he meant to say something, then turned to put accusing eyes on Sheriff Mel Clark.

"You vote-moochin' knothead!" he blazed. "Sam Holland passed out word that he'd make you swallow your pride and call for outside help, but I figured you'd have backbone enough to run your own office in your own way."

THE sheriff turned crimson, squirming uneasily as he glanced again at the townsmen banked in his doorway and windows.

"Who's Sam Holland, Mel?" Raine asked bluntly.

"Holland owns some minin' property north and east of here," the sheriff grunted.

"The only minin' activity I know of that's north and east of here is a group of five small mines bein' operated by the Golden West Minin' Company," Raine said slowly. "Does this Sam Holland have property near the Golden West holdings?"

"Sam Holland *is* the Golden West Minin' Company, snooper." Ben Yarbo glared at Raine. "I'll jog past Holland's office on

my way back to the ranch and tell that fat son— Say, what's the idea?"

Ben Yarbo had leaned forward as he talked and now stretched a long arm towards the two gun-weighted belts he had slammed into the sheriff's face earlier. Navajo Raine had stepped forward and planted a moccasined foot on the tangle of belts.

"I thought you wanted to be locked up, Ben," Raine drawled.

"Quit shootin' off your mouth, and get your big hoof off my gun belts," Yarbo snorted.

"You never aimed to let me jail you in the first place, so cut out this horsin' around, Yarbo," Sheriff Mel Clark put in sharply.

"I aimed to whip the daylights out of you so's you'd be sure and jail me, you fool!" Yarbo glared at the sheriff. "Old Will Holcombe has got over a thousand head of his best steers rounded up, ready to start drivin' north to the shippin' pens at Flag. The old cuss is holdin' them steers where the north part of his Ladder H range touches the south boundary of my Lazy Y."

"And you're afraid rustlers will jump that herd, knowin' you'd be blamed if that happened, eh?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"You know blasted well I'd be blamed if Will Holcombe's steers are stolen!" Ben Yarbo growled. "When Nina, old Will's daughter, gave me back my ring, three years ago, I went back a time or two and tried to talk sense into that snippy little fool's head. Old Will bowed his neck and ordered me off the place. I lost my head and made a lot of talk about bustin' him and spittin' in his face when he come whinin' to me for mercy."

"If you'd come here and put your cards on the table like a man instead of tryin' to beat me up, I'd have helped you," the sheriff snorted.

"I've changed my mind anyhow." Ben Yarbo shrugged.

"I haven't changed my mind, Ben," Raine said quietly. "Head through that door yonder to the back of this buildin', where the cells are. I'm lockin' you up, for questionin'."

"Why waste both our time?" Yarbo grunted. "You know I wouldn't answer any question you asked me."

"If you refuse to answer questions I'll slap a charge of murder and robbery against you," Raine countered.

"Murder and robbery?" Ben Yarbo sneered. "What are you doin', just talkin', Tom?"

"I'm not just talkin'," Raine said quietly. "Three times, within the past seven months, pay-roll messengers bringing money down from Flag to the Golden West Mining Company have been murdered in cold-blood for the money they were carrying. There's also been a steady increase in stage robberies and cattle rustling over this way the past three years. Since you've got four of the West's slickest road agents and stock thieves workin' for you, posin' as cowhands, I thought I might hit pay dirt if I cooped you up and questioned—"

Raine got no further. With a snarl of fury, Ben Yarbo drove a fist into the Ranger's face. Raine rode the punch by shifting back, so that most of the force was lost. He suddenly ripped a left to Yarbo's middle that jerked the tall gunman forward, then sent a hammering right hook to the jaw. Ben Yarbo's yellow eyes rolled back until they showed the whites, and Raine caught him in powerful arms as he slumped forward.

"Get a cell open, Mel," the Ranger said calmly.

Sheriff Mel Clark hesitated, scowling bleakly. Then, impelled by the authority in Raine's green eyes, he turned to the wall behind his desk and took down an iron ring that held a single large key.

"This is your responsibility, Tom," the sheriff said gruffly. "Pick a cell and toss Yarbo in, if you're determined to jail him. This key fits 'em all."

RAINE tugged Ben Yarbo into a narrow cell, stretched him out on a cot, and felt him over for hidden weapons. He came out of the cell, slammed the door, and watched the sheriff lock it.

"In the three days I've been here, Mel, you've hedged and hemmed and given me half answers, at best, to every question I've asked," Raine said flatly. "I'm so blamed vexed with you I could wring your pesky neck."

"Speakin' of questions, I'd like to know how you found out about the mine pay-roll robberies," the sheriff grunted. "And

what was that palaver about Ben Yarbo havin' four of the toughest crooks in the country signed on as cowhands?"

"Mel, the Rangers are well organized, well managed, and runnin' plenty smooth," Raine snorted. "We've got files on every crime that takes place. As to my remark about Ben Yarbo havin' four notorious crooks on his pay roll, I took the bother to scout his ranch on the way down here, and saw the murderin' devils with my own eyes."

"I'll be dogged!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Them four cowhands of Yarbo's, Frank Bishop, Stub Addison, Pete Gray and Ed Wood, ain't the fellers you seen and mistook for bandits, are they?"

"Did you ever hear of Red Franklin, Ad Stubblefield, Ned Grayson and Dan Woodard?" Raine asked drily.

"Fiddle-faddle!" the sheriff scoffed. "Warnin' dodgers have come to me, advisin' me to keep an eye on them four if they come my way. Seems there's plenty of suspicions but no proof that them four are bandits, so I pay no mind to such stuff."

"If you have one of those warnin' dodgers around, Mel, get it out and carefully study their descriptions," Raine said bluntly. "Then take just one good look at Ben Yarbo's four cowhands."

"Dog you, Tom Raine!" the sheriff snapped. "Are you tryin' to hint that Yarbo's four riders are actually this Red Franklin and his bunch?"

"I'm not hintin' a cussed thing, Mel," the Ranger said flatly. "The burly, redheaded hellion you know as Frank Bishop is actually Red Franklin. That short, bull-necked gunslinger who calls himself Stub Addison around here is Ad Stubblefield. The fat, sullen cuss known locally as Pete Gray is really Ned Grayson, and that spindly little vinegaroon usin' the name of Ed Wood is Dan Woodard."

"Hogwash!" the sheriff croaked. "Derned if you don't sound like you'd had a talk with Sam Holland, Tom."

"I'd have called on Holland before this if you'd bothered to tell me that it was his insistence that brought me here," Raine said quietly. "Would you mind tellin' me where I could find the man?"

"Dern it, Tom, don't get sore at me," the sheriff begged.

"Fair enough," Raine smiled faintly. "But while you're gettin' that pride hobbled and halter broke, maybe I'd better keep out of your way. Where would I find this Sam Holland party?"

"Out to his mines, of course," the sheriff said. "He lives there. Go see him, and try to tell the fat old gander that nobody is tryin' to scheme some way of runnin' off with them purty ingots he's got cached out there somewhere."

"Ingots?" Raine echoed sharply.

"Ingots," the sheriff repeated. "Sam Holland is worth barrels of money, Tom. He operates them five gold mines back yonder in the hills more for fun than profit, although he gets what he calls 'average interest on his investment.'"

"How many gold ingots does Sam Holland keep around to admire?" Raine asked sharply.

"Blamed if I know." The sheriff shrugged. "He runs the ore from his mines through a big stampin' mill, then takes the gold and melts it in one of them clay crucible things so's he can pour it into molds to make them little bricks."

"A hoard of gold ingots and a herd of prime steers," Raine growled. "Which will it be?"

"What in tarnation are you talking about?" The sheriff demanded, blinking.

"Blazes, man!" Raine snapped. "I told you Ben Yarbo had some sly reason for comin' here to have you jail him."

The sheriff snorted. "Ben Yarbo done just what I said he would, which was change his mind, at the last minute, about havin' me lock him up."

"Ben Yarbo changed his mind about havin' you jail him only because he found another officer, meanin' me, around here," Raine said gravely. "Yarbo was scared, Mel. He wanted to hightail away from here because my hunch says Red Franklin and his three runnin' mates are all set to make a pass either at Will Holcombe's steers or this Sam Holland's gold bullion. Ben Yarbo wanted to warn his four murderin' pals that an Arizona Ranger is here, nosin' around."

"Malarky, Tom!" the sheriff hooted. "Ben Yarbo just wanted to make a monkey of me by pretendin' he meant to let me lock him up and then ride off, laughin' at me. If them four cowhands of his did happen to be the Red Franklin outfit and planned to jump Holcombe's

herd or make a grab at Sam Holland's gold, Ben Yarbo comin' here and really lettin' me lock him up would make even less sense."

RAINE explained patiently. "Ben Yarbo is one of the men behind the murders and robberies and cattle stealing you've been havin' down here, Mel. He's not the brains of the bunch. Red Franklin is the man who bosses the outlaws and plans those crimes. But Red Franklin and his three toughs need a place like the Yarbo ranch to hang out. Ben Yarbo's big mouth and swaggerin' toughness has got a lot of people suspectin' him of bein' crooked.

"Red Franklin is lobo-smart enough to know that he has to stop people from suspectin' Yarbo. If Ben was in jail when Sam Holland's gold or old Will Holcombe's steers were stolen, Red Franklin knows that a lot of people would begin wonderin' if they had not been mistaken about Ben Yarbo bein' mixed up with those bandits."

"Tom, I hope nobody ever gives me a snort of the stuff you must have been drinkin' to make you dream such wild things as that," the sheriff guffawed.

Raine felt his face burn, and started to make a few pointed remarks about gents who couldn't see the forest for the trees. He bit the words back, gave his big shoulders a weary shrug, and headed for the office door.

"Aw, don't prance off mad, Tom," the sheriff called.

"I'm not sore, Mel," Raine answered. "I'll ride out and tell Will Holcombe to put a Winchester guard around his cattle, then circle back past the Golden West Minin' Company and have a talk with Sam Holland."

Raine stepped out into the barren yard and crossed to the warped boardwalk. He moved rapidly along, avoiding the crowd that tried to stop him with questions. A few moments later he was swinging across vacant lots to a livery barn where he had been keeping a magnificent blue roan gelding he called Wampum. The barn man was out, and Raine piled gear onto the big roan, then led the horse across the lot and out the gate.

"Fat and sassy after three days of guzzlin' oats and loafin', aren't you, fella?" the Ranger said, patting the roan's arched neck as he mounted.

Raine struck a road that ran north from town, letting Wampum travel at a running walk. The Ranger's brow was creased, his green eyes narrowed in thought. He studied the rough hills that lifted up to great, ragged mountain slopes, his mind a turmoil. An hour after he left town he reached a point where the road forked and reined in to look at a big wooden arrow that was nailed to a stout cedar post. The arrow pointed down the righthand fork of the road, and had GOLDEN WEST MINING COMPANY lettered on it in black paint.

"I'd like to go see that Sam Holland gent right now," the Ranger said aloud. "But we'd better go see Will Holcombe first."

Raine was already touching Wampum's side with moccasin heels when he saw the piece of cigar. It was lying at the fork of the road, and was about one-third of what had been an unusually fat cigar. It had not been lighted and had been cut off smoothly.

Raine only half-noticed these details for his mind was busy with many other things. But when a little farther on, he saw another piece of cigar, he stopped and sat frowning down at it for a moment. Then, dismissing the pieces of cigar from his mind, he urged Wampum on. The sight of a third piece brought him to full attention. He scowled perplexedly.

"Some hombre sure ruined a mighty good cigar," Raine muttered. "Wonder why?"

He sent Wampum along the road at a faster pace, and was beginning to think he would see no more distracting bits of cigars when he saw a whole one, lying several feet to the right of the trail. He reined over, leaned down, and picked the cigar up, a grin kinking his lips.

But the grin died quickly on Raine's lips as a brilliant flash winked up at him. He blinked in astonishment at a heavy gold ring that encircled the roll of tobacco. It was a man's ring, set with a huge diamond that blazed firelike in the sunlight.

"Jumpin' Judas!" Raine gulped. "Somebody wedged that ring on this cigar, then lost— No, by gosh! Those cut chunks of other cigars along the trail must have

been dropped for a reason. And this cigar, with the valuable ring stuck on it, could have been dropped deliberately, too."

Excitement hit Raine so hard his fingers shook a little as he carefully worked the ring off the cigar and put it in his pocket. His green eyes kindled with new excitement when he saw that four shod horses had quit the main road here and gone towards the narrow mouth of a gulch. Frowning, Raine rode towards the mouth of the gulch at a cautious walk. He lifted his glance to the low bluffs that towered above the gulch for a moment, then looked down as he drew near the opening.

"Ho!" he said sharply, and hauled Wampum to a halt.

The four horses had gone into the narrow slot between the bluffs, sure enough. And lying there on the sandy soil was a small leather case, such as many men used for carrying cigars. Raine leaned from the saddle and snatched the case up, excitement pounding through him as he flipped back the cover. There were three fat cigars in the case, but no gold-stamped name as the ranger had hoped there might be. He let the cover close and turned the case over.

"Judas Priest!" he yelled.

ON THE shiny-smooth back of the leather case HELP had been deeply scratched with a sharp tool. Under that, in smaller, letters, the same tool had scratched "S Holland."

"Sam Holland!" Raine said tensely. "Somebody took Sam Holland captive. Holland cut up some of his cigars and dropped the chunks, hopin' they would be seen. Then he scratched the word HELP and his name on this case with the point of his knife, after droppin' that fine ring and the cigar I found."

Raine slid the cigar case into his shirt front, green eyes raking the mouth of the gulch. Every sense alert, he nudged Wampum into a walk and sent the roan between the bluffs.

"So my hunch was right," the Ranger droned. "Ben Yarbo aimed to roost in jail, while Red Franklin and his pals captured Sam Holland and fetched him back here into the hills. It sure is an odds-on bet that Franklin and his three murderin' runnin' mates are after Holland's gold bullion."

Raine saw that Wampum was still following the same course the other four horses had taken. He judged that he must have traveled all of two miles when he saw that the canyon was pinching in again, as it had pinched in at the mouth. Raine saw a crooked ridge beyond the narrows and reluctantly pulled Wampum into a heavy stand of young cedars.

"I'd better travel on foot for a while, fella," he said.

A few minutes later, Raine found the camp, his green eyes cold and bright as he peered through the screening cedars. An ancient log cabin stood in the shade of giant sycamore trees. Smoke came from an open fire behind the cabin, where a pool of water glinted invitingly in the shade. Seated cross-legged beside the spring were four men, busily eating from tin plates. Those men were Red Franklin, Ad Stubblefield, Ned Grayson and Dan Woodard!

"Sam Holland will be hogtied inside the cabin, if that bunch hasn't already tortured his secret from him and murdered him," the Ranger muttered softly.

Burly Red Franklin said something to Ad Stubblefield, and they both laughed. Ned Grayson picked up a coffee pot, filled a tin cup, then handed the pot to little Sam Woodard.

Raine pulled in a slow breath, making a decision that set his nerves to tingling. He snaked carefully back until he was under cover, then began circling. When he had the old log cabin between himself and the four dangerous men about the spring, he moved in fast, tingling with the feel of danger and excitement. He aimed for a paneless window in the west wall of the old log house and sprinted across twenty yards of open meadow. Then he was against the log wall, peering through the window. The Ranger sucked in his breath sharply when he saw the man inside.

The man was big, heavily fleshed, and had thick, iron-gray hair. He lay on the cabin floor, bound hand and foot. His broad face was a mass of cuts and bruises, and blood had seeped from his thick hair to stain the dusty boards. The old fellow had been brutally beaten but was still alive, for Raine saw the broad chest move in breathing.

"Sam Holland, no doubt," the Ranger whispered.

Raine pulled himself over the window sill, and reached for the floor with his moccasined feet. Just then a man's voice lifted in a wild shout. Raine twisted, knowing that the sound had come from the back door. Still off balance, his quick half-turn threw him sprawling as a gun poured deafening thunder into the room.

The Ranger rolled frantically, grunting in pain as a bullet raked across his left side. He slithered around until he was facing the back door, lean hands flipping his turquoise-gripped guns from holsters. Spindly Dan Woodard was lurching into the room, beady eyes goggling at Raine over a spitting Colt. The six-shooter in the Ranger's right hand thundered two swift shots, and Dan Woodard howled like a tromped cat. The gunman flipped backwards, struck the log wall near the rear door, then flopped sidewise to the floor, blood gouting from his face.

NAVAJO TOM RAINE wasted little time watching Dan Woodard. Red Franklin and the other two hardcases were shouting wildly, as they raced towards that open rear door. Raine raised his weapons, sent a veritable hail of lead sweeping the ground before the pounding boots of the three men. To his complete surprise, stocky, bull-necked Ad Stubblefield nosed over as if he had been foot-roped.

"One of my slugs glanced off a rock or a hard piece of ground and tagged that booger," the Ranger muttered.

Big Red Franklin and fat Ned Grayson had separated, leaping from Raine's field of vision. The Ranger hastily reloaded his hot guns, keen ears telling him that Red Franklin had come up to the back wall of the house on the right of the open door, while fat Ned Grayson was at the wall to the left.

"Dan, what's goin' on in there?" Red Franklin's voice boomed, harsh with strain.

Raine glanced at Dan Woodard, who lay where he had fallen. Blood was streaming from the scrawny killer's face, yet he was not dead.

"What in heck," came Ned Grayson's voice. "How in blazes did Holland get out of them ropes and get hold of a gun?"

"Don't talk locoed," Red Franklin snorted. "After the pistol whippin' I give old Holland, he couldn't work himself loose."

"You think somebody besides Holland got in that shack somehow?" Grayson's deep voice sounded skeptical.

"What else, you bonehead?" Franklin gritted.

"I guess you're right at that, Red," Grayson rumbled. "Some feller must have clumb in the winder on the far side of this shack while we was eatin'. He got Dan, or Dan would've answered us. And the tricky son nailed Ad in the middle with a slug, too. You reckon that mouthy Yarbo botched his part of this deal, somehow, and tipped our hands?"

"Ben Yarbo will take care of his part," Red Franklin asserted confidently.

"If that meddler ain't already high-tailed out the front door and hit the brush, Red, we'll get him whipsawed," Ned Grayson declared. "Watch this door. I'll go watch the front."

Raine came to his feet, darted to the window and shoved his gun-filled left hand and arm outside. The Ranger's eyes flashed green fire when Ned Grayson's barrel-bellied figure lurched around the back corner of the log house. Grayson, gun in one fat fist, took three running strides before his sullen, pale eyes bugged out at sight of Raine. Grayson's gun whipped up, and his thick-lipped mouth opened to yell a warning to Red Franklin.

Before Ned Grayson could fire the pistol or call a warning to Red Franklin, the big Colt in Raine's lean left thundered. Ned Grayson sprang convulsively into the air, twisted, and crashed to earth. As soon as he saw that Grayson was hit, the Ranger jerked back into the cabin, his right hand lifting to level a six-shooter at the back door. And he was none too soon!

A freckled, ham-sized fist was shoving a cocked Colt past the door facing. Raine saw a thick forearm and glimpsed Red Franklin's carroty hair and part of his craggy face. Raine's six-shooter roared, driving a slug into the forearm back of the questing gun. Red Franklin's voice lifted in a high howl of pained surprise as he fell back.

Raine reached the rear door in three mighty leaps. A fourth carried him out-

side into the hard sunlight. He landed in a crouch, guns leveled, his green eyes boring Red Franklin. The burly outlaw was lifting a big Colt with his left hand.

"Drop it, man!" Raine's voice was flat and harsh.

Red Franklin's savage dark eyes were still glazed from shock. He hesitated a moment, obviously considering the idea of defying the cold drop. Then he cursed chokingly and dropped the gun to clutch his smashed right forearm.

"A scalp-snatchin' Injun!" he croaked.

"Simmer down, Red," Raine said gravely. "And get away from those pistols."

"You ain't an Injun, at that," the burly outlaw growled. "And quit callin' me Red. I'm Frank Bishop, ramrod of Ben Yarbo's Lazy Y outfit."

"You're Red Franklin, thief and cold-blooded murderer, with a dozen years of crime behind you," Raine said gravely. "I shot Dan Woodard, or Sam Wood as he calls himself around here, when he found me in the shack a while ago. A warnin' slug I fired glanced off the ground and whacked Ad Stubblefield, or Stub Addison as he calls himself now, when you and him and Ned Grayson, or Pete Gray as the fat whelp is known here, started towards the shack to investigate the shootin'. I knocked Grayson over with a bullet when he turned the corner of the shack on his way to the front. Now scrooch away from those guns, Red."

"You sound like a sneakin' lawman," Red Franklin burst out.

"I'm Navajo Tom Raine, Arizona Territorial Ranger," Raine said calmly. "You and any of your bunch still alive are under arrest, Red. Now scoot away from—"

RAINE got no further. With a bellow of mingled alarm and fury, Red Franklin snatched at a gun with his huge left hand. Raine leaped forward and slashed down with his right hand gun. Red Franklin's Colt roared, and a bullet snicked at Raine's left ear. Almost at the same instant the Ranger felt his swinging gun land solidly on Red Franklin's head. A smile of grim satisfaction crossed his face as the bandit leader toppled over, senseless.

"Tally all," Raine droned, and reloaded his famous guns before holstering them.

Raine walked over to Ned Grayson and squatted beside the flabby form. He turned the bandit over and seeing that Grayson's only injury was a smashed collar bone, dragged him over beside Red Franklin.

"Noose-bait, both of you," the Ranger grunted. "I'll see about that little Dan Woodard Vinegaroon, then hogtie both of you before you wake up."

Before doing that, Raine stepped into the cabin and went over to grizzled Sam Holland. The old fellow was still unconscious. Raine cut the ropes that bound the man's wrists and ankles, stretched him out in a more comfortable position, then went to look at Dan Woodard who lay against the wall.

"Right cheek bone blasted by that slug of mine, and your ugly mug made even uglier," the Ranger said gruffly. "But come along, killer, and I'll patch you up after a bit."

He picked Dan Woodard up, carried him outside and put him down near Red Franklin and Ned Grayson. Raine glanced at the bandits' four saddles near the spring and decided that he had better get a rope and tie his prisoners before some of them came awake. He started towards the saddles, but swerved off course, thinking he should at least have a look at Ad Stubblefield, who lay just as he had fallen.

"One to bury!" Raine observed grimly. "And four to hang. Ben Yarbo has been in on the robberies and murders Red Franklin pulled around here, so he'll get his neck stretched along with — Judas Priest!"

Raine's voice ended on a startled yelp. He was staring down into Ad Stubblefield's flat-cheeked, heavy-jawed face. Stubblefield's eyes, cold and shiny with terror, were looking up at him. His big hairy hands, clamped to his middle, were bloody and trembling.

"I heard all you said to Red," Stubblefield panted. "Draw me over to the shade, Ranger, and give me a drink of water. A man with a bullet in his innards dies hard."

"You've shot enough men in your time to know how they die, no doubt," Raine said flatly. "Sure I'll take you to shade, and give you water. But I'd better see that wound first."

Ad Stubblefield gulped, pulled his bloody hands away from his middle, and

closed his eyes when Raine knelt down beside him. The Ranger gingerly opened the blood-soaked shirt front—and almost laughed aloud. His slug had hit Stubblefield, sure enough, but instead of tearing through his abdomen, the bullet had simply ripped a gash across the bandit's midsection.

Raine clucked to himself and hastily closed the tough's bloody shirt front.

"Bad, eh?" Stubblefield gulped, opening his eyes.

KEEPING his face sober, Raine stated: "Internal bleedin' is mighty bad business."

"I feel like the spasms might be comin' on, right now," Stubblefield moaned. "Get me over to the shade by the spring, Ranger, and give me a drink."

Raine dragged him over to the spring, trying not to laugh when the tough moaned and trembled and begged him to be careful. The Ranger picked up a tin cup that had held coffee, scooped cold, clear water into it, and handed it to Stubblefield.

"How and when did you galoots get hold of Sam Holland?" Raine asked suddenly.

"We snuck into his livin' quarters, up at his mines, a hour before daylight this mornin' and taken him prisoner," Stubblefield answered promptly.

"From the looks of the camp tools scattered around here, you galoots aimed to stay at this old shack a while," Raine observed.

"Red figgered it might take us two-three days to make old man Holland say where he hides them purty little gold bars he makes at his mines," Stubblefield said.

Raine got up, took a rope off the pommel of one of the four saddles and walked over to the shack. He cut the rope into lengths, securely tied Red Franklin, Ned Grayson and Dan Woodard, then strolled back to stand beside Ad Stubblefield, two short pieces of the rope still in his sinewy hands.

"Did that pistol-whippin' Red Franklin gave Sam Holland make the old man tell where his gold is hid?" the Ranger asked.

"No," Stubblefield replied. "The old fool was stubborn, like Red figgered he would be."

Raine suddenly squatted on his heels, seized Stubblefield, and spun the husky bandit over on his face. He worked so swiftly he had Stubblefield tied and was straightening up before the outlaw got over his astonishment.

"What's the idea, lawman?" Stubblefield wheezed. "My gosh, why hogtie a dyin' man?"

"I wouldn't hogtie a dyin' man, Stubblefield," Raine said.

He turned away when he saw understanding dawn in the bandit's eyes. Scooping up two tin cups from the ground, Raine rinsed them in the cold spring water, then filled the cups, stood up with them, and walked towards the old shack. Ad Stubblefield was snarling and fighting his bonds like a tied lobo wolf, but Raine walked on past him to the shack. He glanced down at the three prisoners against the wall, hesitating when he saw Grayson and Franklin glowering sullenly at him.

"Red tells me you're one of Burt Mossman's snoopin' rangers," Ned Grayson sneered. "I'd like to know what you aim to do with us fellers."

"I'm a ranger, and what I aim to do with you hellions is take you to the Red Ford jail," Raine said calmly.

"After all these years, a fancy-pants lawman that ain't been shavin' too long trips me up!" Red Franklin groaned. "What I'd like to know is how you ever got here."

Raine's green eyes twinkled, and the corners of his lips kinked in a faint smile.

"When we get to town, Sheriff Mel Clark will no doubt tell you that all I did was straddle a hunch and ride it straight to you galoots and your prisoner," Raine chuckled.

He stepped through the back door of the cabin, the blank stares of the two bandits following him until he passed from their view.

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Next Issue: NAVAJO TOM RAINE in HAVE A HARP, RANGER,

Another Arizona Ranger Action Story by JACKSON COLE!

TOO QUICK on the TRIGGER

"Leave that gun alone!" Sue cried, firing a bullet into the ground

By ROCKY BEACH

BILL COOPER halted his big bay horse and sat gazing somberly at the saddle lying on the ground beneath the overhang of the huge rock. A strange stillness lingered in the heat of the bright summer morning. Even in the distance Cooper was sure he recognized that saddle.

"So they got you, Mike," he muttered. "I was afraid of that when I found that roan you were riding yesterday standing in front of the corral gate at dawn this morning. The saddle was missing, and there was blood—dried blood on the horse's left shoulder."

Cooper dismounted, dropping the reins so the bay stood ground-hitched. How long had it been now since he and Mike Howell had decided to go into partnership and have a little ranch of their own? Two years—no, it would be three years this fall. Since buying the ranch, both men had prospered.

Cooper's leather chaps rustled, the ground was hard and dry beneath the soles and heels of his boots as he walked toward the giant rock. The hot sun was warm against his broad back even through the cloth of the flannel shirt he wore. It had been almost a month now since the last rain in this section.

He hated the little sounds he made as he moved—one should walk silently when approaching the dead. The guns in his holsters rubbed against his leather covered thighs. He was close enough now to see the C Bar H Mike had burned in the left fender of the saddle. C for Cooper and H for Howell. They had been proud of that brand.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Cooper said, hope surging through him. "Just because Mike was carrying five thousand dollars to deposit in the bank when he left the ranch yesterday noon is no reason to think somebody downed him and got the money."

It was a comforting thought and Cooper clung to it, trying to forget the blood on the roan that had come home alone, or the saddle lying here two miles north of the road that led to the nearest town.

Beneath the overhang the ground was covered with thick dust. Cooper frowned as he noticed the tracks of some big animal there.

"A bear," he said. "I saw a big black

Bill Cooper Fights Odds to Avenge His Pard!

bear about two miles from here two or three days ago. Looks as if he is still wandering around this section."

Then back in the deep shadows between the huge boulder and another giant rock he saw the boots. The toes pointed up toward the sky, and there were marks where the heels had scraped the ground as the body had been dragged back there.

COOPER went closer glad that the bear apparently had not found the corpse. Mike Howell was lying there on his back, his eyes closed and a bullet in his chest near his heart. Evidently the wound had bled a little before he died. His gun was in his holster.

Mike looked peaceful enough, but older than his thirty years, and somehow smaller than he had ever seemed in life. The loneliness that would always be with Bill Cooper swept over him as he stood there. For ten years he had known Mike Howell. They had worked for various outfits together before they decided to pool the money they had saved through the years and have their own spread.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Cooper said softly. "Maybe if I had ridden into town with you yesterday it might not have happened."

The words were hard to utter for there was a strange, choking feeling in his throat. He heard the hoofbeats of the horses then, heavy against the hard, dry ground and growing louder. He stepped out from between the rocks and waited, eyes fixed on the dim, winding trail that led south toward the road.

Three riders loomed into view as they circled a clump of trees. Two big men dressed in range clothes. Between them was a slender girl in a buckskin riding outfit. Cooper knew the girl. She was Sue Blakeman, whose father owned the B In A Box five miles west of the C Bar H, but the men were strangers.

They saw him standing there waiting and the two men casually switched the reins of their horses from their right hands to their left. It was the gesture of men who rode warily, right hands free to grab their guns when they met a stranger.

"Bill Cooper!" Sue Blakeman said as the three riders drew closer. "What are you doing here?" She brought her mare to a stop. The two men also halted their horses.

"My partner lost his saddle and I just happened to find it," Cooper said.

He knew they couldn't see Mike lying back there between the rocks and he didn't want to tell anyone about that yet. He didn't like the looks of these strangers. They were coarse faced, hard men with the stamp of the owlhoot about them. Cooper couldn't understand why Sue was riding with them, apparently of her own free will.

"A saddle is easy to lose if your cinch breaks and the horse runs away," the larger of the two men said, running his free hand over his unshaven face. "I'm Carl Wolf, and this is Jed Ledford."

"That the saddle your partner lost over there?" Ledford asked, riding forward so he passed Cooper on the left. "Reach!"

It happened so suddenly that Bill Cooper wasn't ready for it. He found that Wolf and Ledford were both covering him with their guns. The girl sat motionless in her saddle, watching and waiting.

"Nice to know I'm among friends," Cooper said bitterly as he held his hands up. "But I don't get the idea."

"Let's just say Jed and I are the nervous type." Wolf swung out of the saddle and dropped the reins while Ledford kept Cooper covered. "A man wearing two guns sure scares me."

He walked over and snatched the guns out of Cooper's holsters. Sue abruptly wheeled her horse and started to ride away. Ledford fired a shot over her head.

"Don't try to get away," he shouted. "Or I'll kill the mare."

Sue slowed her horse and rode back, slumped down in the saddle dejectedly. She hesitated an instant, and then swung out of the saddle, ground-hitched the mare near the other horses.

"That's better," Ledford said. "I sure would hate to shoot a pretty horse like that mare."

"You always were a sentimental hombre, Jed," Wolf said as he went to his horse and placed Cooper's guns in a saddle pocket. "Just never could stand hurting anything, including horses."

"And I believed you two were a couple of cowboys out of work and looking for jobs," Sue said. "Was even fool enough to agree to ride back to the ranch with

you and see if Dad would give you a job."

WOLF had put his gun back into the holster. Ledford still sat in his saddle covering Bill Cooper with his Colt. Cooper stood waiting, but there was nothing passive about his attitude.

"Light and rest your saddle, Jed," Wolf said. "Now that Cooper found his partner's saddle I reckon we better have a little talk with these folks."

"The saddle wasn't all I found," Cooper said coldly, with a quick glance at the space between the two big rocks.

Ledford dropped his gun into the holster. He dismounted and left his horse ground-hitched with the other animals, then came back to where Cooper, Wolf and the girl now stood.

"Talked to a cattle dealer in town yesterday," Wolf said casually. "He told us he had just bought a bunch of pure bred Herefords from the owners of the C Bar H. Paid five thousand dollars cash for the stock, too."

"So you got a description of Mike Howell and probably of me," Cooper said. "When you two saw Mike riding into town to deposit the money in the bank today, you shot and killed him and stole the money."

"Oh, no!" Sue protested in horror. "Not Mike!"

"It's true, Sue," Cooper said. "Mike is lying back there in the shadows between those two big rocks, a bullet in his chest."

"That was a mistake," Ledford said. "Always figured that Wolf was too fast with a gun. Howell died before we got the money and we haven't found it yet." He glared at Cooper. "Maybe you know where that five thousand is, Cooper."

"If I did, do you think I'd tell you?" Cooper snapped.

There was hate in his eyes as he stared at the two big men. Men who were as tall as he was and far heavier. One thought lingered in his mind. They had killed Mike, shot him down without giving him a chance to fight back, for Mike's gun was still in his holster back there in the shadows.

"You'll talk!" Wolf suddenly grabbed Cooper from behind, and held his arms in an iron grip. "Better convince him, Jed."

"All right, Carl," Ledford said.

He stepped closer to Cooper and smashed a hard fist into the rancher's face. With Wolf holding him from behind Cooper had no chance to fight back, or even duck the blow.

"That will be enough of that!" Sue said as she came up behind Wolf and snatched the man's gun out of the holster. She jabbed the barrel of the Colt into his back. "Let him go and put your hands up or I'll kill you."

Apparently Wolf believed the girl really meant it. He released his grip on Cooper and raised his hands high above his head. Ledford cursed and drew his gun. Cooper hit him with a right to the chin and a left to the body before he could fire. The gun went flying out of Ledford's hand to land on the ground a short distance away.

"I'll murder you with my bare hands!" Ledford roared.

He lunged at Cooper but a hard right drove him back. He recovered quickly and the two men closed in pounding heavy blows at each other. Their hats had fallen off, but they paid no attention to a little thing like that.

Sue stood a little distance away, behind Wolf, keeping him covered with the gun. Ledford backed and then slipped and went down, dragging Cooper with him as he grabbed the rancher's shirt-front in an effort to keep from falling.

Ledford landed on his back with Cooper sprawled across him still pounding at him. Ledford discovered he had fallen not far from the gun he had dropped. He tried to reach the Colt by stretching out his left arm.

"Leave that gun alone!" Sue cried, firing a bullet into the ground close to Ledford's left hand. "Fight fair!"

Ledford hastily drew his arm away from the gun. At the same time Cooper smashed a left to Ledford's jaw and knocked him out cold.

SUE had made a mistake in stepping out from behind Wolf to fire the warning bullet into the ground. Wolf stood with his arms held high—but his right arm came down like a pile driver and knocked the gun out of Sue's hand.

"Looks like my deal now," Wolf said, shoving the girl aside so roughly that her hat flew off and she fell to the ground.

Wolf leaned down to pick up the gun. From behind him came an ominous growl and a big black bear loomed into view from behind some boulders.

"A black bear!" Wolf shouted as he glanced back over his shoulder. "I'm getting out of here!"

He dashed away without even stopping to pick up the gun. The bear snorted and ambled after the big man, paying no attention to the other humans around him. Wolf disappeared behind a clump of trees with the bear in close pursuit.

"That bear sure was a big help," Cooper said as he got to his feet. Ledford was still unconscious. "If it hadn't come along when it did Wolf would probably have downed me."

Cooper gathered up the two guns and placed them in his holsters. Then he picked up his hat and put it on. Sue tried to rise and then winced and remained where she was on the ground.

"What's the matter, Sue?" Cooper said anxiously.

"I think I sprained my ankle when I fell," Sue said. "It hurts and I can't stand on it."

"I'll see what I can do for you as soon as I take care of Jed Ledford," Cooper said. "Don't want to risk his making any more trouble for us."

Cooper got his rope from his saddle and tied up the unconscious man. Ledford opened his eyes and looked about him dazedly just as Cooper finished.

"What happened?" Ledford asked. "Where is Carl?"

"He's gone," Cooper said.

"So you downed him, eh?" Ledford said. "I knew that would happen to him some day. He always was too fast on the trigger."

Cooper let it got at that. He walked over to Sue. Just as he reached her the black bear reappeared and stood glaring at them. Cooper drew his left hand gun and held it ready to shoot as he reached for the other Colt.

"Don't shoot, Bill," Sue protested. "At least not unless you have to do it. After all the bear probably saved our lives."

Cooper stood there, gun ready as he waited tensely. The bear stopped snarling when it found no one apparently intended to hurt it. It wandered over to Mike Howell's saddle, sniffed at it, pawed it around a bit and then went away from there, intent upon some business of its own.

Cooper and Sue were so intent on watching the bear that they did not see Carl Wolf as he sneaked up to the horses. The big man drew one of the guns he had taken from Cooper out of the saddle pocket on his horse.

"Bill, look out!" Sue screamed as she turned her head and saw Wolf. "It's Wolf and he has a gun."

Wolf fired, his bullet searing Cooper's right shoulder. Then the Colt in Cooper's left hand roared. Wolf staggered as the slug struck him in the chest. His gun dropped from his hand as he sank weakly to the ground.

"Always was too quick on the trigger," Ledford said as he watched. "Carl didn't take time really to aim."

Cooper walked over to Wolf. The big man was badly wounded but he would live. Cooper picked up the gun Wolf had dropped. It was strange how much better he felt now that he had the men who had downed Mike. He glanced at the saddle. There were pieces of green paper fluttering around in a gentle breeze.

"The money!" Cooper said. "The five thousand dollars. Mike must have had a hunch he might run into trouble and hid it in the saddle someway so it wasn't easy to find. The bear pawed the money loose."

Cooper went over to Sue. "Everything is all right now, Sue," he said. "I better check that ankle."

She tried to rise and was amazed to find she could stand up.

"Just wrenched my ankle, I guess," she said. "Seems much better now."

She moved and fell against him, and he caught her in his arms and held her close to him.

"Seems like you belong right where you are," Cooper said, looking down at her.

"You know I think so too," Sue said softly.

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Coming Next Issue: WHEELS WITHOUT HOOFS, a Colorful Novelet of Pioneer Adventure by SYL MacDOWELL—And Many Other Stories!

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it

by CHUCK STANLEY

THINGS were humming on the C Bar S with the Spring Roundup providing the main source of activity. The old mavericker was able to recall some of the good old days when he had been able to do his part in bronc riding and calf branding, and these reminiscences brought a sparkle to his eyes. But now he was content to seat himself at the side of the Dutch Oven alongside the chuck wagon at the roundup camp to palaver with the greener who was interested in jotting down his collection of range lingo.

As the oldster stoked his pipe, struck his match carefully, and then drew the flame into the bowl of the briar, he said:

"I've been doing a lot of digging into the background in North Dakota, so we'd have some real good things to talk about. Most of the ordinary things about North Dakota were brought up in our discussion of South Dakota, because, like you know, the Dakota Territory was all one big piece of land until it was divided into North and South Dakota in 1889."

Lewis and Clark

"That was the Washington's Birthday declaration that we talked about last time, wasn't it?" the greener inquired.

"You're right, son," the old mossy-horn declared. "Sure enough. But the Dakota Territory, and particularly North Dakota, had a lot of historic things happen to it in the years long before that. The first Americans who did very much in the way of bringing the territory to the attention of the folks back East were Lewis and Clark when they made their famous expedition to the Pacific Coast. They were en route from 1804 to 1806, and spent their first winter near Mandan, North Dakota, which was close to the lodges of the Mandan Sioux, or Dacotah Indians, who gave the territory its name."

"Wasn't there some French Canadian background, too?" the Arbuckle inquired, his pencil poised over the notebook in which he was writing. His back was curled up against a saddle propped up against a fence pole. He might have looked a bit awkward, but he had learned from the cowboys that this could be an extremely comfortable position.

"You're right, there," the mossy-horn declared. "The Red River of the North runs along the eastern border of North Dakota and flows through Canada into Lake Winnipeg. Naturally with French-Canadian trappers and voyageurs journeying over the waters from the Great Lakes and Lake of the Woods to Lake Winnipeg, some of them came down to the Dakota Territory. As a matter of fact in 1780 a number of them settled at Pembina, North Dakota. The Hudson's Bay Company had posts and trading stations in the North Dakota area and Lord Selkirk established a fort at Pembina in 1810."

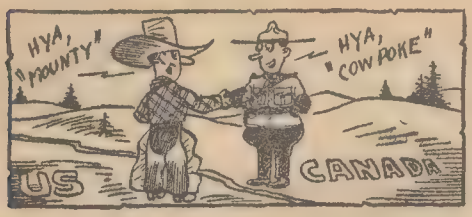
The R. C. M. P.

"Wasn't there something about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in connection with North Dakota, too?" the younker inquired. "I've always been interested in the Northwest Mounted, and I guess most live wire American youngsters are, too."

"I reckon you're thinking about the March

Old-Timer and Tenderfoot Discuss North Dakota!

West in 1874," the old-timer declared. There was a sparkle in his eyes as he said: "My father told me about that. He knew a good



many of the boys in the Mounted Police, used to run cattle on the Canadian ranches, and later on he took part in the rodeos in Calgary and Red Deer when I was just a little button. Yessirree, the folks in North Dakota had a chance to settle their minds on the type of boys those Mounties were long before the Indians in the Canadian Prairies saw them."

"How was that?" the Arbuckle asked.

"Well,'" the oldster replied. "The troop was recruited in Toronto, and at that time there was no overland route between Toronto and Fort Garry or Winnipeg. Therefore the Canadian Government requested permission from the United States Government to bring the Northwest Mounted Police to Grand Forks, North Dakota by train, and they loaded their Red River Carts there and headed northward for Pembina, and then started westward into the prairie provinces, reaching what is now Alberta, the same year. They were a fine bunch of boys. For many years supplies were sent to the Northwest Mounted Police posts through the United States from a supply base in New Orleans."

"Golly," declared the greener as he made his notes, "that certainly ought to prove that the American-Canadian frontier is the friendliest in the world."

Indians in Control

The old-timer then went on to explain that the cowboys with their cattle didn't get into the North Dakota country until well along in the Seventies. The Sioux Indians had control of the greater part of the country until well after the Civil War, and the first formal session of the Indian lands in 1851 was little more than a routine action, for the white men violated so many sections of the treaty that the Indians were constantly on the war path until after 1868 when Red Cloud finally signed a treaty to settle matters in this part of the Northwest.

"Why was there so much Indian fighting up along the Canadian Border?" the younker inquired. The old-timer slapped his gnarled hand against his chap-covered legs and laughed aloud. Then he replied:

"That was one of the smartest things in pioneer history. The U. S. Cavalry in this part of the West was commanded by General Pope in those days, and he had some smart rannies named Carrington, Ten Eyck, Powell and a few others working with him. Red Cloud, the clever Sioux chieftain was organizing the Cheyennes, the Arapahoe and the Sioux. Folks thought Red Cloud had things pretty much his own way because he was doing a lot of battling with the Sioux in the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana, but there was a surprising angle to it all."

"How was that?" inquired the chronicler.

"Well, the Union Pacific Railroad was trying to build its line through southern Nebraska, and General Pope figured that one way to keep the Indians from bothering them would be to set up a line of forts in the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana. While the Indians were busy trying to prevent these forts from being built, they couldn't bother the Irish and Chinese railroad builders further south."

"That was clear-thinking, all right," the pilgrim agreed. Then he looked at the wrinkled and thumb-marked map of North Dakota that had been one of his constant companions since they had left the big C Bar S ranch house for the round-up camp. He followed along some of the lines, and the oldster looked over his shoulder at them. The names popped up and the old-timer moistened his lip to discuss their origins.

Bismarck and Fargo

Naturally the first one of these names to come up for consideration was Bismarck, the State Capital, and there was no difficulty in tracing down the fact that it was named after the Iron Chancellor of Germany. Many of the farm colonies which sprang up in the Indian country of North Dakota were founded by Scandinavians and Germans. When the younker discovered this he asked:

"Where did the cowboys come in in this country?"

"That was easy," the oldster replied. "Many of the cattlemen from further south in the Western states drove herds up into the Dakotas in order to fatten them up on the

corn and wheat that the frugal immigrant farms were raising. It was easy to ship them from there on the new railroads to the stockyards in Chicago. It was the farm-feeding of cattle by Northern farmers that was partly responsible for the rapid growth of Chicago and its replacement of Kansas City and St. Louis as a cattle market."

The attention of the researchers was diverted for a time by the men coming in off the day herding job to get their evening's chuck. When the oldster and his rookie wrangler companion settled back to their discussion of North Dakota place names, it was natural that Fargo should come up for consideration. The greener asked whether it had anything to do with Wells, Fargo Express Company.

"Maybe so," replied the mossy-horn, "Mr. Fargo might have had a sizeable chunk of his dinero in the express company, but he got his name hooked onto Fargo, North Dakota, because he was a director of the Northern Pacific Railway. When the railroad came through a section, usually there was a company official to dedicate the station, open up the town-site and announce the plans for the progress of the company in the future. At this time, the company official usually remembered all of his friends."

"That sounds like a good idea," the greener said, "but didn't the president of the railroad company get any recognition?"

"Oh, surely," the oldster declared. "But he was a bit more bashful than some of the directors. They named a town after his first name, instead of his last name. The town is Williston, North Dakota, and the name was S. Willis James, who was the president of the Great Northern Railroad."

English Names

The greener made a note of this, then pointed out a number of English sounding names on the map. He asked whether there were English farmers in the North Dakota area, just as there were Germans and Scandinavians. The old-timer shook his head in a sharp negative and remarked:

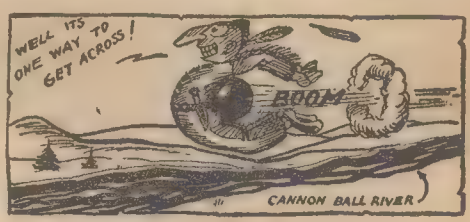
"That was part of the railroad's doings, too. A good many of the people who had money invested in the Northern Pacific Railroad and the Great Northern Railroad were Englishmen. They came from places in Leeds, York, Berwick, Turnbridge and Rugby. As a gesture toward these people, the railroad company named a number of the towns and stations after these English communities."

This was an interesting bit of information, and a sidelight as to how certain names were attached to frontier towns. However the Arbuckle was anxious to bring back the discussion to place names that would reflect more of the cowboy and Indian influence that was more typically American. The oldster was glad to fall in with this and immediately called attention to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

"That's the big Sioux Indian reserve," he pointed out. "It extends from the southern part of North Dakota down into the northern part of South Dakota. We've already mentioned Red Cloud and his part in the Sioux Indian wars. Standing Rock was the reservation where Red Cloud and his warriors finally settled down and the great Sioux Chieftain died there in 1909."

Porcupines and Cannon Balls

The pilgrim studied the area in the vicinity of Standing Rock Reservation for some signs of the simple names that the Indians usually assigned to their camps, and he was well rewarded. He discovered that one of the largest creeks running across the Reservation was



Porcupine Creek, recalling the spiny-backed animals that were such a frontier delicacy to cowboys and Indians who could find no larger game in the late Eighties and Nineties, and which are still salvation for many lost hunters today.

Further west was Dog Tooth Creek, so named because of a grim association with the Indians commemorated in the remains of an Indian cemetery. In the old Indian days before the Spanish brought horses into the North American continent, the Indians did most of their traveling with small travois drawn by dogs; and in the winter time used the dogs extensively on dog-sleds, as the Eskimos and northern Indians still do today. With the coming of horses, however, the Plains Indians relegated their dogs to the

role of camp scavengers and even used them for human food.

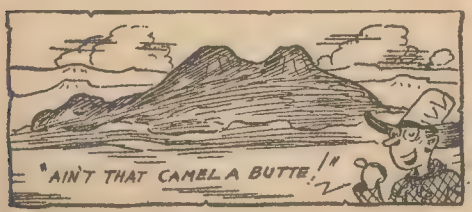
An Indian who had a particularly satisfying dog pet, however, usually insisted that the animal be buried with him upon his death. Along Dog Tooth Creek in the Indian burial grounds in the old days were many relics of this custom which gave the creek its name.

Dog Tooth Creek flowed into Cannon Ball River, which was named as a symbol of the new power of the white men who came into the Indian country, as represented by their small brass cannon which were capable of throwing solid balls and canister for great distances into the midst of mounted Indians. This developed a wholesome respect both for the United States cavalry in North Dakota and the Northwest Mounted Police further north.

Rock Formations

The naming of the natural rock formations in the southwest part of the state also followed the pattern of simplicity. There were rocky buttes that had various outstanding forms. One of them had many colors, bright and gleaming in the setting afternoon sun. The Indians called this Pretty Buttes, and the cowboys chuckled a bit but continued to describe the place by this name. A rather curious shaped rocky peak on one of the forks of the Cannon Ball further west, looked like a casket, so the local white men and red men referred to it as Coffin Butte.

A chalky tinted upthrust of rock was simply designated White Butte, and a humped rocky prominence a bit further east in the



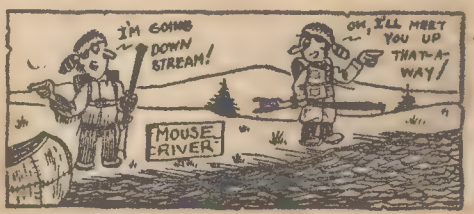
Thirty Mile Creek country was called Camel Butte, because of its resemblance to a crouching camel.

The Indians themselves frequently camped at the base of a pinnacle that looked like the lodgepole framework of one of their tents, and it did not take much imagination on their part to decide that this was Tepee Buttes. Sometimes scientists took away some of the simplicity, but their names were equally descriptive. The cowboys who occasionally followed stray cattle into the badlands east of the Little Missouri River usually referred to the area as the lava hills, because of the brown scourings from long-dead volcanoes.

A museum expedition decided, however, that lava was not exactly accurate, so the same hills suddenly blossomed out with the name Scoria Hills, which is just another way of saying lava in high class language.

The Mouse River

While he was studying these interesting elements in the naming of the towns and



places in North Dakota, the younker recalled one element that had been called to his attention, and he asked about it:

"Isn't the Red River of the North one of the few large rivers in the United States that flows northward?"

"You're sure right enough there," the old mossy-horn declared. "But there's another curiosity in North Dakota when it comes to rivers. That's the Mouse River, or the Souris as the French-Canadians used to call it. It's one of the few rivers in the whole country which flows north, south, east and west."

"That sounds almost impossible," the greener declared. "Does it flow around in a circle?"

"Just about," the mavericker declared with a chuckle. He put his gnarled finger on the crumpled map until he reached a spot just north of Burke County, North Dakota and indicated where the Mouse River rose in Saskatchewan.

It flowed southeastward into North Dakota, crossing the border near Patterson, and moved along past Minot to Sawyer. Here the river's course turned eastward and northward and it flowed in this direction until it reached Berwick, North Dakota.

Just north of Berwick, the Mouse River flowed northwestward toward Willow City, and back through Bottineau County, North

Dakota, into Manitoba, Canada, there it again changed its course and flowed northeastward into the Assiniboine River which joined the Red River of the North at Winnipeg.

"By Golly," the younker declared, "you've sure convinced me. I'll bet the Indians and the French Canadian fur trappers had plenty of fun riding around on that river. If you happened to miss a friend on the river, you could throw your canoe on your back, hike overland and meet him at another bend in the river."

"That about right," agreed the oldster.

He looked up at the night sky. Sounds were dying out in the roundup camp around him. The waddies had rolled into their soogans to get a good night's sleep. They would be up bright and early in the morning.

The oldster and the Arbuckle said good night to each other, and made another date in the indefinite future to discuss their subject of the place names in other parts of North Dakota. The greener's notebook was bulging with interesting facts.

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HERE FORKS the TRAIL

CHAPTER I

Dead Man At The Depot

THE MAN lay in cold shadow, close up against the western end of the railroad station platform. At the eastern edge of a flat world the sun was just climbing into view. The level boring flame of it made Rufe Converse squint and duck his head a little as he pulled his fleece lined coat more snugly about him, for, after the reasonable warmth of the caboose of the eight car freight train, the chill morning air of these high plains bit deep.

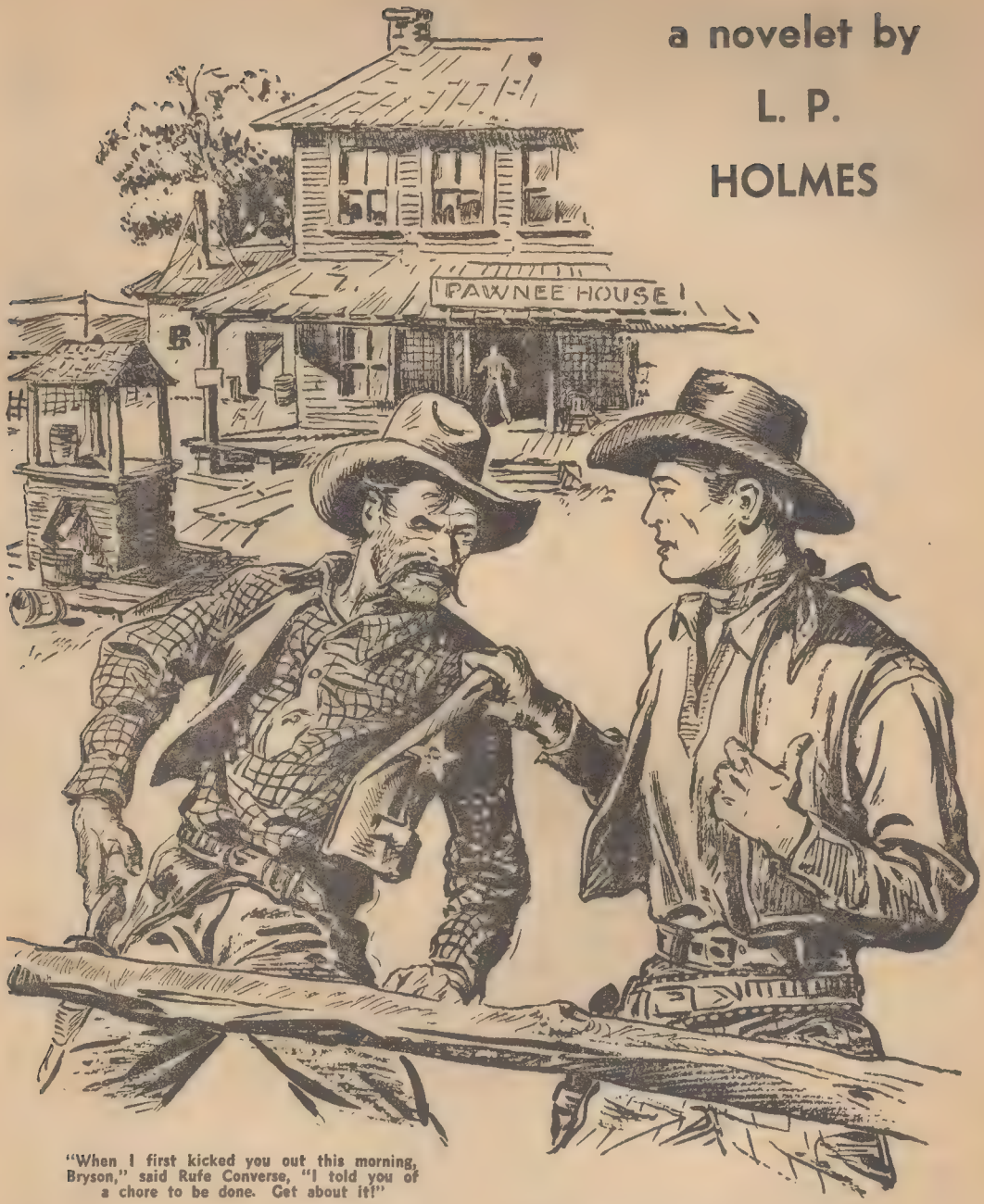
A brakeman came hurrying past, blowing on his hands. Converse jerked a shoulder toward the man at the end of the platform. "He must have slept cold last night."

Rufe Converse Bucks the Bonanza Crowd as He

a novelet by

L. P.

HOLMES



"When I first kicked you out this morning, Bryson," said Rufe Converse, "I told you of a chore to be done. Get about it!"

The brakie gave the huddled figure a careless glance. "Another drunk, plenty of such in Pawnee. This town is wide open, a wolf baying at the stars. Spend a night in it and you'll see what I mean."

The brakie hurried on and the door of the railroad station slammed as he closed it behind him.

Rufe Converse looked across the hundred yards of open ground which lay be-

Battles to Set Things Right in Pawnee Town!

tween the depot and the town of Pawnee proper. This whole setup was so new and raw the sagebrush still grew thickly across that open; only a single winding trail connecting the station with the town.

Converse headed for the opening of the trail, swinging his meager grip-sack in one hand. A solid man, he was taller than he seemed, for the width of his shoulders squared him. A dusting of unshaven bristle darkened his long solid jaw. His nose was bold, high arched, his eyes were cool and blue and reserved, slightly narrowed, as though he was constantly looking far and missing nothing.

They swung again to the man huddled by the platform. Converse hesitated, slowed his stride. It wasn't exactly anything that he saw, it was something he felt. He swung around and went over to the man. Then he knew what it was he felt. Death.

Converse lifted his eyes, let them swing all around. It was a move of wariness, old and instinctive. The only person in actual sight was the engineer, up there beside his engine, probing at a bearing of some kind with a long spouted oil can. Converse put his grip-sack down, dropped on one knee.

HE FOUND the man was stiff as a log. He'd been dead for hours. He lay on his side, as though sleeping. But his right hand was locked in a fold of his blue flannel shirt, as though trying to hold something back. He hadn't been able to hold all of it back. Blood stiffened his shirt front for an area of several inches about the clenched hand.

He was young, maybe three or four years under Converse's thirty summers. Not bad looking, either. Features clean cut with a small scar angling across the point of the chin. His hat was still on his head, a flat brimmed Stetson that had seen plenty of weather. Half the brim was now folded under by the weight of his head. A leather band ran around the crown, stamped with stars. It looked like a home made job, for the stars were not all centered or even in their spacing. His jeans were worn, his boots old and deeply scuffed about the heels, but rubbed smooth on the inside from contact with stirrup leather. His spurs had seen much use, the rowels blunted, chain links worn flat. He looked as if he might have been a cow hand, fresh in from a long trail drive.

Converse got back to his feet, looked around again. The engineer was still working with his oil can. Converse picked up his grip-sack, swung himself up onto the station platform and went into the station house.

A gust of warm air met him. The brakeman was backed up to a creaking station stove, alternately blowing at a steaming cup of coffee, then sipping at it cautiously and noisily. A gaunt, shaggy headed man in striped bib overalls was bent over a battered desk, licking a gnarled thumb and going through a pad of way bills.

The brakeman looked narrowly across his coffee cup at Converse.

"If the smell of this coffee brought you in, you're out of luck, mister. Jake keeps a pot of it brewed for the train crew, and that's all," he said crassly.

Converse's retort was curt. "Never mind the coffee! That man at the end of the platform is dead."

The shaggy man in the striped overalls jerked erect. "Eh? What man is dead?"

"He's lying in the shadow at the west end of the platform," said Converse. "This fellow," and Converse jerked his head toward the brakeman, "figured him just another drunk. I did, too, at first. Then I took a closer look."

"Well, for Pete's sake!" exclaimed Jake, the shaggy headed station master. "Let's have a look."

After his look, Jake shook his head. "Never saw him before. Another of those wild trail hands. This town is like that. It kills 'em at night and buries them by day. This one ain't the first. There's been near a dozen since I took over here. Well, this is a job for Bryson."

"Who's Bryson?" demanded Converse.

"Town marshal. Tell him about it when you go over, will you? Ask anybody. They'll point out Cass Bryson. How long you think this feller's been lyin' here?"

Converse shrugged. "Most of the night, probably."

Jake blinked. "And me sleepin' not fifty feet away. Mebbe I wouldn't have slept so well, had I known. Now much more than a kid, is he? Too bad, but that's the way they are. They come in off the long drive, wild for town. And this lawless town busts 'em, one way or another. Well, there ain't anything I can do about it. I run my sta-

tion, mind my business. You'll tell Bryson?"

Converse nodded. "I'll tell him."

THIS TOWN of Pawnee was just a single row of rough, hastily constructed buildings, some two hundred yards long, facing the railroad and the sprawling cattle loading corral beyond. Here there was only one side of a street. The other side was anywhere a man wanted to call it, out in the far running sage.

Moving down the row of buildings, Rufe Converse hailed the first man he saw, a sleepy, liquor coarsened fat man, swamping out a saloon.

"Cass Bryson—where'll I find him?"

"Hotel, I reckon," came the grouchy answer. "That's where he does his sleepin', when he doesn't spend the night at Kansas City Kate's."

Converse went on, eying the town with bitter distaste. He had seen so many others like it. They jumped up over night, almost, and out of nowhere, like poison fungus on a dead log. They gorged for a time on the fallacies and weaknesses of men, then sickened and died in brutal ugliness. But somewhere else, where the flow of cattle or gold or buffalo hides crossed the prairie world, they sprang into evil growth again, to go through the same roaring cycle of wickedness and greed. They were spotted along these lonely railroads like sores. They were part of a world that Rufe Converse had been in too long, and one from which he had yet to figure a way of escape.

Cass Bryson was still in bed and asleep, so the clerk in the hotel told Converse. The clerk was a little man, shifty eyed, truculent if he thought he could get away with it, servile if he didn't. The cold directness of Rufe Converse's glance brought him swiftly to heel. But he added, "Cass likes to blanket up until around noon. He don't take kindly to bein' disturbed before then. But if you want to take the chance, it's all right with me. Room Four. Along the hall to the right."

Bryson had slept with the window of the room tightly closed. The air was stale, heavy with the ghosts of whisky fumes and cigar smoke, noisome of man and blankets too long unclean. Bryson slept soddenly. A belt and six-shooter hung over a corner post of the iron bed. Converse awakened the marshal by the simple move of stepping across to the window and opening it with a crash.

Bryson came lunging up, sleep fogged and bewildered, pawing blindly for his gun.

"Forget that!" rapped Converse curtly. "This is official business."

Bryson ceased trying to get at his gun. Propped on one elbow, he blinked and stared at the tall, wide shouldered man standing over him. He coughed and spat before he spoke.

"Don't ever do that to me again," he growled thickly. "And my business don't begin until I'm up and on the street. Get out!"

Converse did not move. "There's a dead man lying over by the railroad station," he said flatly. "I was asked to report that fact to you."

Bryson laughed with coarse mirthlessness. "A dead man? Well, that doesn't surprise me. They're common around here. And no reason to get me up before my time. You're a stranger, so I'll let you get by with it this time. But don't do it again. Get out!"

"My friend," said Converse, his voice coldly soft, "you rate yourself too big."

He reached out a hand and grabbed, put the full power of his shoulders into the lift and drag. Bryson and all the blankets came off the bed together, piled up in a heap on the floor. Converse caught the marshal's belt and gun off the bed post, tossed them through the open window. Then he stepped back and watched the cursing, mumbling Bryson fight his way out of the tangle of blankets and get to his feet.

Bryson was raging with bluster and threat, but these all ran out of him under the watchful, sardonic gleam in Converse's eyes.

"A good marshal," murmured Converse, "never puts sleep before duty. You've much to learn."

"And you," retorted Bryson surlily. "As you'll find out."

Converse laughed. "Nothing dies quicker than a coyote that tries to be a wolf." He turned and walked out.

It was plain that the shifty eyed clerk had heard the muffled ruckus of Bryson's abrupt awakening and now he watched

Converse in some uncertainty. At Converse's request he shook his head. "We're full up. No rooms left. You're out of luck, mister."

"Then I'll take Number Four," said Converse calmly. "Throw Bryson out. Let him spend all his nights at Kansas City Kate's. That's about his size. And clean that room up. Put new blankets on the bed. I'll be back to take over after I run down some breakfast."

The clerk had the look of a man who could not believe his ears. His narrow chin dropped and he gulped as he swallowed.

"Throw Cass Bryson out, just to make room for you!" he protested. "Say, mister, just who do you think you are, anyhow?"

"The name is Converse—Rufe Converse."

Now indeed did the clerk's narrow jaw sag and his eyes bulge. He grew more than servile. He groveled.

"I—ah—didn't know—didn't recognize you, Mr. Converse," he explained frantically. "Come to think of it, we have got a room. Number Eleven. I'll see that it's ready for you."

Converse's lip curled. "No," he said flatly. "Not Number Eleven. Number Four. I like the view from that window. I'm leaving my grip-sack here."

He dropped the bag on the rough board counter that passed for a desk. Then he went out. The shifty eyed clerk stared after him, licking nervous lips.

"Rufe Converse!" he mumbled. "Here's news that'll interest a lot of people. 'Specially Chief Magland. Rufe Converse! Here in Pawnee! My!"

CHAPTER II

Town Marshal

ROGER'S restaurant, the hashhouse where Rufe Converse breakfasted, fitted the town it stood in. The getup was crude, none too clean. The food was coarse the coffee bitter. But Converse's hunger was robust and he thought, sardonic humor crinkling his eyes, that he could remember eating in one or two worse places. He paid for his meal, drew a leather cigar case from an inner pocket, selected one of the three perfectos it held and left the hashhouse with satisfying smoke rolling across his tongue.

The sun had climbed high enough to drive off the worst of the night chill. On all sides the country ran away in an infinity of drab flatness. A breeze, winging up from the south, brought the smell of coal smoke from the railroad yard, where the freight train and its engine still stood. In time, perhaps, the railroad would push on, but for the moment Pawnee was rails end.

The town was beginning to stir, coming to life sluggishly, after its night of excesses. A stout, ruddy faced man in "store" clothes came down from the hotel, paused beside Converse.

"Rotten town, ain't it?" he said plaintively. "And to think I'm stuck here for the summer! Friend, never work as a cattle buyer for Lahn & Trotter. They send you to the worst places!"

Converse swung his head, grinning. "It could be a long summer," he admitted.

Despite the lugubriousness of his words and tone, the cattle buyer had a merry eye. He grinned back. "Come to think of it, I could quit, couldn't I? Well, what's for breakfast this morning?"

"They called it food," drawled Converse. "I guess it was. So far I've held my feet. I guess you'll survive."

The cattle buyer chuckled. "It's a pleasure to meet a man with a sense of humor this early in the morning." He stuck out a hand. "Graham's the name."

"Converse, here."

The cattle buyer started slightly. "Could that be—Rufe Converse?"

"It is."

The cattle buyer drew a long breath. "Well, now—if you stick around, it could be an interesting summer, anyhow. I'll probably see you again."

Converse nodded. "Probably."

Graham, the cattle buyer, went into the hashhouse. Converse remained as he was, looking at nothing in particular. The angles of his face hardened to a weary bleakness.

If he stuck around! Well, he wouldn't know about that. He never seemed to be able to settle that point, anywhere. Here for a time, there for a time. Always the old restlessness creeping up on him until

he could not endure life unless he was up and moving on—to somewhere, anywhere.

Friends left behind, just a few of these. And enemies, plenty of them. The one regretted his going, the other rejoiced at it. Other men managed to find an anchor somewhere, to know contentment. But not Rufe Converse.

The hours he'd given to mulling this thing over, to analyze it, and thus find an answer! But the answer always eluded him. There wasn't any, it seemed. Inwardly he raged at himself. He was thirty, a good part of the strong years of his life already had slid by. For these he had to show—what?

Well, a lightning fast gun and a reputation of sorts built on that fact. The clothes on his back and a few hundred dollars in his jeans. He might build that stake up if his poker luck held. If it didn't, he'd be down to bare eating money again and the necessity of buying another job with that fast gun. These were his sole possessions, except a string of memories he would have liked to forget.

Never a home. Just hotels like that shabby joint down the street. Eating in fourth rate hashhouses like the one at his back. And always some town like this one of Pawnee, crude, rough, dangerous.

THE strange part of it was, he despised these sort of towns. He hated the greed, the raucous crudity, the brutal tempo of such towns. He hated them because they were always the worst, never the best. It gave him a sort of sardonic satisfaction to take hold in such a town and put it over the jumps, to watch the crooks break and scatter, to see the rough ones fold and quit. Rufe Converse was a man no one else ever fully understood, because he never fully understood himself.

The sound of hoofs broke through Converse's somber reverie. There were two, who had come riding in out of the sage. The one in the lead was a young woman, little more than a girl but a year or two out of her teens. Her clothes were faded, weather worn. Woolen blouse that had once been blue, divided skirt of heavy cord, fringed a little at the hem from the drag of sage brush. But she rode with the ease and surety of long practise.

Converse studied her profile as she drew even with him, was queerly startled to the abrupt realization that it was a pretty one. No, pretty was the wrong word. Attractive was better, because it held too much character and strength for mere prettiness. From under the sagging brim of her hat a tress of tawny hair hung.

Jogging along at the heels of the girl's pony was a wiry, gnarled old-timer, thin whiskers grizzled. He carried a Henry rifle across the saddle ahead of him.

The girl seemed to feel the impact of Converse's glance, for she looked directly at him. She was as attractive full face as in profile. Cheek bones slightly high, mouth soft and red and generous. Abruptly she reined her pony about and rode directly up to Converse. Gray eyes, very clear but also troubled, studied him frankly. Then she spoke.

"Are you the town marshal?"

Converse, startled, touched his hat. "No, ma'am, I'm not. Fellow named Bryson is the marshal."

"I'm sorry. You sort of—looked like you might be. Have you any idea where I might find this Bryson?"

"He rooms at the hotel, ma'am. I'm going that way. I'll locate him for you if you want."

The girl inclined her head slightly. "Thank you."

Converse swung away toward the hotel, the girl and her grizzled companion following on their horses, pacing their mounts to Converse's long, swinging stride.

A blur of angry voices met Converse as he stepped into the hotel. Cass Bryson had the shifty eyed clerk backed into a corner, was giving him a profane reading off. The clerk, caught between two fires, was making heavy weather of it, sputtering and cowering.

"But I tell you, Cass, that fellow is Rufe Converse. He said he wanted Room Four, so all I could do was tell you. It don't pay to argue with Rufe Converse."

"Converse or no Converse, I don't get out of that room," snarled Bryson. "I'll argue with him any old time."

"Start in!" rapped Converse.

Bryson whirled, and the clerk, making the most of the respite, ducked away.

There was a physical coarseness about Cass Bryson. He had the look of once be-

ing quite a man, but a man who had gone to seed. He hadn't been strong enough to resist the ever present blandishments of the excesses offered by towns like this one of Pawnee, and these had broken up the fiber in him, both physical and moral. He looked what he had become, a sot, relying on liquor for nerve and the weight of his badge of authority to hold him up. The bloodshot anger in his eyes showed that he would have liked to carry through against Converse, but the old time spark that had once stiffened his shoulders was gone, lost in the mire of wasted years.

"You got a cast iron nerve," he blurted at last. "Throwing a man out of his room and taking over like you owned the joint."

"Yes," murmured Converse "But you'll get out. We'll settle that later. Just now there's a lady outside who wants to see you. Get me right," added Converse with emphasis, "I said—a lady! Don't keep her waiting."

BRYSON was startled. "A lady?" The shadow of a leer pulled at his lips. "I don't know a lady in this town."

"You're just about to meet one," Converse told him coldly. "Get out there!"

Bryson went out, achieving a semblance of swagger. Converse stood in the hotel door, watching.

Bryson moved up beside the girl, who still sat her saddle. "I'm Bryson," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

Converse saw the girl's glance go over Bryson, saw the shadow of distinctive aversion darken her eyes. Bryson saw this, too, and ugly color gathered in his veined, pouchy face. His voice roughened. "What do you want?"

"I'm trying to find my brother," said the girl quietly. "He was in Pawnee yesterday on business—"

"What kind of business?" broke in Bryson. "I got nobody locked up, if that's what's worryin' you."

Converse stirred a trifle restlessly, the old fires beginning to smolder. This fellow Bryson had better learn to mind his words and manner.

"I'm not worring about Jack being locked up," the girl retorted, her head high. "But he was supposed to be back at camp by dark, last night. He didn't show up. So now, I'm trying to trace him. As town marshal, I thought you might be able to help me locate him. We brought a shipping herd in to the railroad."

"Cow hand, eh?" growled Bryson. "Afraid I can't do you any good. They come and go by the dozen. Maybe he's still holed up in one of the dives. I'll take a look after I have breakfast. Jack, you called him. What's the rest of it? Jack—who?"

"Jack Wheeling."

"What's he look like? This time of day you find some of 'em in all sorts of places, still dead drunk."

Cass Bryson was being deliberately brutal. The chill in Rufe Converse's eyes deepened. Bryson, he decided, needed a lesson in manners. But that would have to wait.

The girl's head went high. "Jack is no drunkard. He's twenty-six, about five feet eleven. He was wearing jeans and a blue flannel shirt."

Bryson laughed coarsely. "That would fit a good half of them that ride in. I ain't no mind reader."

For the first time the grizzled rider with the girl, spoke.

"That hat band Jack made on the trail in, Lucy. The one with the stars on it. That might help."

The girl nodded. "Jack made this hat band out of a piece of leather," she told Bryson. "He stamped the stars on it with the end of an old file. They weren't very evenly done."

In the doorway of the hotel, Rufe Converse knew a sudden cold weariness. He was thinking of a dead man, lying over at the end of the railroad station platform—a dead man with a leather hat band with uneven stars stamped around it.

CHAPTER III

Money To Collect

CASS BRYSON, the town marshal, was still shrugging away Lucy Wheeling's description of her brother when Rufe Converse's hand settled on his shoulder and swung him around. Converse's words were harsh.

"When I first kicked you out this morning, Bryson, I told you of a chore to be

done. Get about it! I'll take over here."

Bryson gulped at the look in Converse's eyes. Bluster died in his throat. "Suits me," he blurted, turning away and heading for the mouth of the trail that led through the sage to the railroad station.

Converse felt the impact of the girl's startled eyes. This, he thought, was just about the toughest chore he ever faced. He wondered where to find the proper words. The girl helped him here, for she read correctly the look on Converse's face. She swayed a trifle in the saddle.

"Jack! Something's happened to him!" Terror was building up in her voice. "Please! Where is he?"

"Ma'am," said Converse gravely, "you better get down and wait in the hotel. I want to help you in this. I hope you'll do as I say."

This girl had nerve, plenty of it. Converse saw her fight to master herself, saw her win the fight. She dismounted and stood steadily, though her eyes were still dilated with dread. She did not resist when Converse took her arm. He looked past her at the grizzled old rider.

"You wait here a minute, old-timer. I'll be right back."

In the hotel the shifty-eyed clerk looked at Converse and the girl with some uncertainty.

"Find a chair for the lady," ordered Converse. "Then, leave her alone. See that nobody else bothers her, either."

The clerk ducked a servile head. "Just as you say, Mr. Converse."

He brought the chair and the girl sank into it. She caught at Converse's hand, almost a childlike gesture. Converse patted her on the shoulder.

"I won't be long, ma'am. Keep your chin up."

He went out and jerked his head to the old rider. "This way."

They went along the trail to the station. Bryson and Jake, the shock headed station master, were at the west end of the platform, looking down.

"He's dead as cold beef, all right," said Bryson crassly, as Converse and the old rider came up. "And he's wearin' that star stamped hat band. Looks like the dame's found her brother."

Then, as he saw what was in Rufe Converse's face, Bryson added hastily, "You don't need to look at me like that, Converse. This ain't my fault. I can't wet nurse every drunken puncher who lands in town."

"I was," growled Converse bitterly, "just figuring where to hit you. That mealy mouth of yours will do!"

Converse's big right shoulder rocked forward and his fist crashed into Bryson's face. Bryson went down, sprawling, and lay there, dazed and bleeding. Jake, the station master, gulped and backed away a step. Converse turned to the old rider.

"Well?"

"It's Jack," said the old fellow simply. "This is going to be mighty rough on Lucy."

"Can you think of a reason?" Converse asked.

"Jack never abused liquor, and he wasn't a trouble hunter. He came to town to pick up payment for our herd. Cattle buyer named Graham bought the herd and shipped it out two days ago. He was ready to pay by check, then, but Jack an' Lucy, they figured cash would be handier. Graham agreed to pay that way, if he could have a day or two to get the cash together. Jack came in to collect. Now he's gone!" The old rider wagged a sorrowful head.

"We'll check on all that, later," said Converse. "You go on back and do the best you can with Miss Wheeling. I'll be seeing you shortly."

THE OLD rider went away. Converse looked at Jake, the station master. "Give me a hand. We'll carry the body into the station. Arrangements will have to be made."

"I'm runnin' a railroad station, not a morgue," said Jake hastily. "And what was the idea of sluggin' Cass Bryson?"

"The idea," said Converse coldly, "is that this frowsy town needs a currying, and it's going to get it. You included, if necessary. Give me a hand, I said!"

Jake looked at Cass Bryson, still down, still dazed. He said, "I don't like no part of this." But he gave a hand.

They laid Jack Wheeling's body down in the frugal baggage room and covered it with a blanket.

In the station proper the telegraph key began to rattle. "That's me," said Jake, listening to the call.

"Go tend to it," Converse said. "I'll be

back, later."

Converse went out. Cass Bryson had just struggled to his feet, was dabbing at his bleeding mouth with a grimy bandanna. His eyes were shifty, but murderous.

"You were deliberately rough with that girl," Converse told him frostily. "When you hand it out that way, that's the way you get it. If you expect to stay on as town marshal, Bryson, you're going to have to change your ways. I'll be judge of that. Now come on with me. Here starts a rat hunt."

They went back to town, Bryson walking ahead, still a little uncertain on his feet. The cattle buyer, Graham, was just leaving the hash house, lighting up a cigar. Converse hailed him and Graham came over, looking at Bryson's split, puffed lips and fuming eyes in some astonishment.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Trouble," nodded Converse. "You bought a herd from a Jack Wheeling a few days ago?"

"That's right. And prime stuff, too. Wheeling didn't want a check. It took me a little time to scrape up the cash but I finally got it through Chief Magland, over at the Bonanza. I paid Wheeling off in full last evening."

"Where?"

"Over the end of the Bonanza bar. No question about that payment is there? It was the agreed on price and I got Wheeling's bill of sale right here." Graham reached for a coat pocket.

"Your word is good with me," said Converse. "How much did you pay Wheeling?"

"Forty-eight hundred. Say, what's wrong anyhow, Converse?"

"Wheeling's dead. His body was found over by the railroad station. Not a cent on it."

Graham was honestly shocked. "The devil you say! That's rough. He was a nice young fellow, Wheeling was. Steadier, quieter than the usual run of trail hands. And there was a girl, his sister. A fine girl. Blast it, I'm sorry to hear this!"

"There will," said Converse grimly, "be others who'll be sorry—in a different way. Thanks, Graham. I'll see you around."

Jack Wheeling was buried that afternoon. Pawnee's Boot Hill was new, but already fairly extensive. It was just a flat, cleared of sage, a quarter mile out from town. Barren, lonely, desolate. The rough wooden grave markers would endure for awhile. But in time the sage would take over again. The patient earth would settle, rains and snows would fall and the marching years blot out all sign. There was no arguing with the eternal.

There were four mourners. The girl, the old rider, Rufe Converse and the cattle buyer, Graham.

The girl was splendid. She was dry eyed until it was over. Then she turned away blindly, the tears at full flood. The old rider took her in his arms, comfortingly. Graham blew his nose furiously. Rufe Converse stood quietly, looking across the sage at the town of Pawnee.

ANOTHER rotten leech of a town, brutal, depraved, callous. Like so many others he had seen. All alike. No kindness in them, no fairness, no shred of decency. Time might color them in the fanciful light of romance and lusty living. But Converse knew better. They were as ugly and soulless as a slug smeared with slime.

Well, he had laid red wrath through others just like it. Now it was Pawnee's turn.

The old rider, tugging at his arm, brought Converse out of his bitter reverie. "Lucy would like to speak to you, Converse."

Converse went over to her. She was brushing away the last of the tears. From now on, Converse knew, she would carry her grief deep locked within her. She would do this because of the thoroughbred strength that was hers. She faced him gravely, held out a slim hand.

"You've been very kind," she said steadily. "I want to thank you—for everything. Rio and I will be leaving for home right away. I—I never want to see this place again. So it's goodby—and thanks again, Mr. Converse."

"Where is home, ma'am?"

"South. Over a hundred miles. On Pinnacle River. It's a sweet country, a clean country and a friendly one. I can't wait to get there."

"But you must wait," Converse told her. "There's the matter of forty-eight hundred dollars that this town of Pawnee

owes you. You can't leave until you collect that."

She shrugged slim shoulders wearily. "That money is gone. There is no chance of getting it back."

"You're wrong there," Converse told her gently. 'I'll get it back for you."

"But those who—who stole it, how can you hope to locate them, find proof against them?"

"They are part of the town," said Converse, his tone harshening slightly. "So the town will pay. I know this kind of town, know it well. I should. I've seen so many of them. No, when you leave that money will be safe in your saddle-bags. Where is your camp?"

She pointed. "Out there, about two miles. There's a little water course. You can't see any sign of it from here. But it's there."

"You and Rio go back and wait at your camp," directed Converse. "I'll be out to see you."

The girl studied him, nibbling a red under lip. "Why should you do this—for me?"

"Put it that a man has to do a few right things in this world to square up for all the wrong things he's done—and lived to regret," said Converse quietly. "Sometime this evening, I'll be out to see you."

The girl and Rio rode away. Converse and Graham walked back to town together. Graham spoke gravely.

"That girl's the pure quill, Converse," Graham said. "She's taken a lot of wicked punishment today. To lose her brother and the price of a shipping herd besides. Probably she and her brother hit the trail to Pawnee with high hopes. She goes back with nothing—nothing!"

"There's nothing to be done about the big loss," said Converse. "But she won't go back empty handed."

Graham flashed him a quick look. "What do you mean?"

"This town of Pawnee comes across with forty-eight hundred dollars," Converse told him grimly, "if I have to whip it out of the hide of every man in the place."

"That," observed Graham quietly, "stacks up as a man-sized chore. I've been in Pawnee considerable longer than you and I've had a chance to size things up. This is a tough layout, my friend."

Converse laughed harshly. "I've seen 'em tougher and made 'em come to heel. You say you paid Jack Wheeling that money across the end of the Bonanza bar. You say this Chief Magland watched the transaction. Who else?"

GRAHAM pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. "Nobody in particular that I can recall. Maybe one of Magland's bartenders."

"What did Wheeling do after he got the money?"

"He stowed it away in a money belt, bought me a drink and said he hoped to see me again next spring. Then he went out."

"Which suggests that he intended to head right back to camp where his sister and the old rider were waiting for him. Now the average man he might have bumped into outside wouldn't have had any idea that Wheeling had such money on him. The knowledge that he did must have been all in the Bonanza. Furthermore, with Wheeling to all intents and purposes about to leave town immediately, somebody had to move fast to head him off. What did you do after Wheeling left the Bonanza?"

"There was a heavy faro game running. I went over to the faro table to look on. Sa-ay—you're not playing with the idea I had anything to do with the dirty deal Wheeling ran into?" Graham stopped short, stared at Converse.

Converse dropped a hand on his arm. "Of course not. I'm just hoping that something you might have heard or seen would put me on the direct trail."

Graham nodded, strode on again, frowning thoughtfully. He shook a rueful head. "No hang it! I never noticed a thing out of the way. Never gave the matter a thought. Sorry I can't help you, there."

"Can't be helped. So I'll just have to go on what I know," said Converse. "Which is that you paid Jack Wheeling for a shipping herd, in cash. At least one man besides yourself and Wheeling saw the transaction take place. Chief Magland. Wheeling leaves the Bonanza. This morning he's found out by the railroad station, knifed to death. The money is gone. I'll start from there."

Back in town, they paused before the hotel. "I'm wishing you all the luck, Con-

verse," said Graham simply. "Your reputation has traveled a long way. You've marshaled some plenty tough towns into step. With the marshal's badge on your shirt, you could probably make Pawnee sit up and beg. But without that badge, it'll be just you against the pack. I'm taking nothing from you, understand, but after all, there's a limit to what one man can do."

Converse nodded. "I know what you mean. But—we'll see."

Converse went into Room Four. New blankets were on the bed. His grip-sack stood at the end of the bed. The room had been swept, cleaned up. The open windows had aired it thoroughly.

Converse relaxed on the bed, hands under his head. Boards of the roughly constructed building creaked in the heat. These were the high plains for you. Hot during the day, cold at night.

Converse lined up his thoughts. Graham's last words with him carried plenty of the weight of truth. Carrying a town marshal's badge made a big difference in how far a single man could push his weight. Nobody knew that better than Converse himself. Most men had an instinctive respect for the badge of law. With it on, one man's fight was like twenty. Without it he was just himself, just one of the crowd.

Rufe Converse had never made the mistake of over-rating himself. If he had, he'd long since have been lying under some lonely wooden grave marker, just as Jack Wheeling lay at this moment. But he'd learned plenty, down the trail of the rough, tough years. He knew that an ounce of clear thinking was worth a ton of blind, wild lead. So now he put in a good hour of such thinking.

Then he left, looking for town marshal Cass Bryson.

CHAPTER IV

Skulker In The Dark

HE FOUND Bryson in Room Eleven. The marshal was sprawled on the bed, wide awake, staring at the faded, scabbed ceiling. His only move when Converse entered was to turn his head and stare with cold hatred. Converse, understanding the look, nodded.

"Don't blame you particularly," he said, pulling up a chair. "In your place I'd feel the same. Yet, you'll find no profit in hating me, Bryson. What you need to do is take a look at yourself, remembering what you once were, and what you are now."

"I'm satisfied," growled Bryson. "So why should you give a cuss? I didn't invite you in here. I hate your innards, Converse. I'd like nothing better than to see you six feet under. Now you know just where I stand."

Converse got out a cigar, lit it with care. "In our trade, Bryson," he said calmly, "we get to read men and sometimes know them a little better than they know themselves. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't last very long. I've got you read. There was a time when you were a good marshal—a mighty good marshal. You asked no favors, you gave none. You ran your town like it ought to be run. Those were good days, weren't they, Bryson?"

Bryson stirred restlessly. "I'm in no mood to listen to any preachin'," he mumbled surlily. "You drift into this town, you push me around. You think I'm goin' to kiss your hand, after you've clubbed me like a dog?" He reared up on one elbow, spat on the floor.

"In the old days," murmured Converse, "I couldn't have pushed you around. You were a man then, Bryson. Nobody pushed you around. But somewhere back along the trail you took the wrong fork. So now you don't walk like a man any more. You're down on your knees. You've let them rot the fiber out of you. They use you and despise you at the same time. They feed you booze, they snap their fingers, and you bark and roll over."

Bryson cursed bitterly, swung his feet off the bed, sat up. For a second Converse thought the man was going to spring at him. But as Bryson caught the cold level weight of Converse's eyes, his shoulders slumped and he licked his swollen lips helplessly. A flicker of pity flashed across Converse's lean face. His words rolled steadily on.

"This town saw a dirty murder and robbery last night. You should be doing something about that, Bryson. I'd like to

see you doing something about it. For your own sake as well as for that of a fine girl who was robbed of her brother as well as the price of a shipping herd. Now, I intend to see that she gets back that stolen money. If, in the doing, I get the killer under my gun, so much the better. You and your badge could help a lot, man. I'd like to have you with me. Between us we'd make this mangy town sit up and beg. It's up to you whether or not you get up off your knees. Maybe it'll take quite an effort. But once you do, you'll like the air up here better."

With that, Converse went out.

Cass Bryson sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the empty door, face twisted, eyes moiling savagely. He reached under the bed, brought up a whisky bottle, yanked the cork from it and put the bottle to his lips.

But he did not tilt it. He did not drink. He lowered the bottle slowly, still staring at the door. But now his look changed. The hard glare went out of his eyes, leaving in its place a moody reflectiveness. He recorked the bottle, put it back under the bed. He got up, went to the window, looked out at Pawnee's street which had only one side to it.

For a long time Cass Bryson stood there. After a while his glance dropped to the badge on his left shirt front. The tarnish of long lack of care lay on it. Bit by unconscious bit, Bryson's shoulders straightened. He turned from the window and the lines of his face were altered. The pouchiness of loose living was still there, but in some strange way, underneath that pouchiness lay a new found hardness. Or perhaps it was the ghost of the firmness of better and older years, now returned.

BRYSON moved about the room with a step that was no longer slouchy and loose, but instead a stride of decision. He stripped off his shirt. From a gripsack under the bed he brought out a new, clean one. He got out a razor, soap and brush. A bucket of water and a tin basin stood on a box that did duty as a bureau. Bryson got busy with it.

He shaved and washed, donned the clean shirt. He took the badge from the old shirt, polished it until it gleamed. He pinned it on. He jacked the shells out of his gun, cleaned and oiled the weapon, reloaded it.

He started to leave the room, hesitated, came back and delved into the grip-sack again. He brought out a small picture, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. The likeness of a sweet faced, grave eyed woman looked out of the picture at him. Cass Bryson looked at the picture a long time, before folding the tissue paper back about it again. But he did not put it back into the gripsack. Instead, he tucked it carefully into the breast pocket of his shirt, right under his badge. Then he left the room.

After leaving the town marshal's room, Rufe Converse went directly to the Bonanza. This chief hell-dive of Pawnee town was, next to the hotel, the biggest building along the street. It was a square, barn-like affair, with the bar taking in the front end of it, except for door space. The rest of the place was given over to gambling layouts, with a dance floor at the far back end.

With sundown, and evening not far away, it was beginning to liven up. Still faced, cold-eyed gamblers were drifting in, pausing at the bar for a drink, then going to the various gambling tables, where they laid out cards and chips and other gear. They were making ready for another of Pawnee's wild nights.

Some painted and flounced dance hall girls showed up, talked with the gamblers, gathered in little groups among themselves. A piano, back on a corner of the dance floor, began to tinkle under the nimble fingers of a pallid, ghost thin man with a dead, half smoked cigar in one corner of his mouth and a drink handy at one end of the keyboard at all times.

Chief Magland, owner and high lord of this little piece of organized hell, stood at one end of the bar, surveying his domain. He was a large, sleek, slightly swarthy man, with flat, veiled eyes and a predatory mouth. The title of "Chief" held no special significance, for there was no touch of Indian blood in him. But there was a cold, relentless authority that brooked no argument from his hirelings.

He looked up as Rufe Converse stopped beside him, his black eyes blank and unreadable. He waited. Converse spoke quietly.

"The name is Rufe Converse."

Magland nodded curtly. "Heard of you. Have a drink." He called to one of his two bartenders. "My private bottle, Slip, and two glasses."

"Why, no," said Converse, shaking his head. "Not for me. I'm particular that way. Who I drink with, I mean."

Magland stiffened slightly, his eyes brittle as bottle glass. Here was insult, calculated and deliberate. Rufe Converse had meant it that way, wanted no mistake about it. And now, before Magland could recover from this first blow, Converse shrugged a shoulder that took in the whole layout.

"Getting ready for another night of murder and robbery, eh?"

Slip, the bartender, had delivered bottle and glasses. Magland poured one of the glasses half full, downed it neatly before answering. Then he said coldly, "Murder and robbery? I don't follow you, mister."

"Last night," outlined Converse briefly, "a young cattleman named Jack Wheeling was paid forty-eight hundred dollars in cash, across the end of this bar. You saw the deal take place, Magland. Minutes later, Jack Wheeling left this dive. This morning he was found dead—stabbed. The money was gone. Are you following me, now?"

MAGLAND'S eyes squinted slightly. "Tough break," he said laconically. "What's it got to do with me and my place?"

Converse shrugged. "You guess. I understand you're quite a power in this town, Magland. So, get busy. This town owes Jack Wheeling's sister forty-eight hundred dollars. I'll be in later this evening to collect it for her. You have it ready for me! *Compre*?"

Chief Magland poured himself another drink. "Yeah," he said, "I've heard about you. Rufe Converse, the town marshal who tames the tough ones. Well, all I can say, Converse, is that you're not the marshal in this town, and Pawnee is a tougher town than you ever saw before. Tougher than you are—or ever will be. *Compre*?"

"So!" Converse said it very softly as he moved straight in on Magland. He put his open left hand flat against Magland's chest and with short, jarring pushes, drove the dive owner back and back until Magland brought up heavily against the wall beside the door. Twice he let Magland bounce off the wall and slammed him back again.

"Tough, did you say, Magland?" demanded Converse. "Where is it? How tough?"

Magland gave no answer. Converse stepped back, laughing contemptuously.

"Forty-eight hundred dollars, Magland. I'll be in for it this evening."

Converse went out, a big man, filling the doorway momentarily with something that left the whole watching room breathless and uncertain and concerned.

The sweat of cold, bitter rage slimed Chief Magland's face, ran down his wrists. He cursed wickedly at one of the dance hall girls who was staring at him with cynical eyes. A generous daubing of rouge could not fully hide the darkness of a bruise on one side of her face. Magland had put that bruise there.

He poured himself a brimming glass, downed it with a gulp, set the glass down with a crash that split it in half. To the bartender, Slip, he said thickly:

"Come full night there'll be forty-eight hundred in cash, stacked in the middle of this bar. Converse can have it—if he can take it away. If he can!"

Rufe Converse strolled the barren street, watching twilight flow in across the plain. He thought of a camp out on a lonely watercourse, of a grief stricken girl waiting there, held by the promise he had given her.

Why had he made that promise to Lucy Wheeling? What impulse was it that had caused him to step into this affair? He had no ounce of authority in this town beyond what he could make for himself with his gun. True, he had a reputation which would give some men pause. But there had been other men with reputations like his, earned in the same way, men who tamed the tough towns of the West. And how many of them died peacefully, in bed?

Sometime, in some town, just such a town as this one of Pawnee, the dice rolled wrong, the wrong card turned up.

There had been a time, back in earlier years, when there had been a fascination, the heady intoxication of grim excitement, in the game of currying the tough towns.

But no longer. Now there was left only a vast distaste for the towns and the game, and a nagging irking discontent with himself and his life. It was this, perhaps that had put the restlessness in him, kept him on the move, like a man searching for something he yearned for but could never quite overtake.

He stopped in at the dingy stable and livery corral at the far end of the street. There he dickered for a horse and saddle.

"Maybe I'm buying the bronc and riding rig," he told the stable owner, "and maybe I'm not. I'll pay you the full price now. I may come back and return the horse and gear, in which case I'll pay just for the rent of it and expect the rest of my money back. A deal?"

The stable owner nodded. "Suits me if it does you. When'll you be ridin'?"

"Later, tonight. And," Converse told him with a cold, twisted grin, "there's always the chance that I might not come back at all. If I don't come for the horse, it's still yours and so is the money."

The stable owner looked at him wonderingly. "What you aimin' to do, friend, spit in a tiger's eye?"

"Not a tiger," said Converse, shrugging. "But maybe a rattlesnake."

HUNGER stirring in him, turned Converse into the same dingy hashhouse. He sat facing the door while he ate. He was nearly through with his supper when Cass Bryson came in and crossed over to him. Converse saw the improvement in the town marshal's appearance and his eyes widened in pleasurable surprise. Noting the look, Bryson spoke gruffly.

"Don't ask for explanations. Just listen. I know this town from end to end and the people in it. I know when they're lyin' and when they're telling the truth. I've been askin' questions. When young Wheeling left the Bonanza last night, he never showed up in any other dive in town."

Rufe Converse's eyes narrowed. "That could prove that the knowledge of Jack Wheeling having that money on him was held only in one place—the Bonanza. Much obliged Bryson. Sit down and have a bite with me."

Bryson hesitated, then pulled up a chair. He ate in silence. Converse, finished with his food, lit a cigar. Presently Bryson looked up.

"I heard how you handled Magland," Bryson said. "Don't underestimate the man."

"I won't. I like the look of your badge, marshal. It's got a nice clean shine to it."

Bryson flushed, but did not reply.

In the street outside came the sudden rushing pound of racing hoofs, a shrill whooping. Noting the alert turn of Converse's head, Bryson shrugged.

"Cow hands coming in to take off the top of the night. There's half a dozen trail herds being held back out in the grass country, waiting their turn at the shipping corrals, and for cattle cars to arrive. Quite a few of their riders manage to get to town pretty often. They make meat for the tiger."

Converse nodded. In other towns than this, he'd seen them come in, fresh off the long loneliness of the drive trails. Youngsters they were for the most part, wild and heedless, reckless with bursting spirit. And the trail towns fattened on them.

For a little time Converse and Bryson stood outside the hashhouse. Then Bryson said, "Well, I got to start making my rounds. In this game if you keep the little fires in control, you may never have to put out a big one. Good luck!"

Bryson started off, hesitated and said over his shoulder, "I'll be seeing you around."

Converse stayed as he was for some time, thinking about the surprising change in Cass Bryson and pondering the town marshal's last remark, which somehow seemed to carry an emphasized significance.

With the growing dark came deepening chill, a biting wind beginning to sweep in across the plains. Converse felt the need of his coat, and headed for his hotel room to get it. Lamp light was feeble in the parlor of the hotel and under the murky glow of it the shifty eyed clerk's face seemed pallid saffron. He met Converse's glance for only a flicker, then looked hastily away, running the tip of a nervous tongue along his lips.

Moving down the shadowy hall to Room Four, Converse wondered about that look. There was no good reason for it. The clerk had no cause to fear him. Why then, that furtive, scared rodent look? Not over

something that had happened, but perhaps over something expected to happen!

Reaching the door to his room, Converse drew his gun. And as he threw open the door, he followed it closely, and fast, swinging to the left as the door swung. This brought him facing the figure that lunged at him from the blackness to the right of the door.

Dim light breaking through the door from the hall, flickered on naked steel, ripping wickedly out and down. Had Converse entered the room normally, the knife must have driven deep and fatally. As it was, he swung barely clear. The man behind the knife, carried off balance by the power of his fruitless lunge, went to one knee.

Frantically the fellow tried to recover, to regain his feet and bring his knife in a slashing sweep at Rufe Converse's body. Converse smashed the fellow across the head with his gun, smashed him a second time even while the man was crumpling, putting the full weight and power of his shoulder into the final blow. Converse knew by the feel of the second blow that he couldn't have killed the skulker any more surely if he'd shot him through the heart.

For a little time Converse waited, listening. There had been little sound in this short, deadly affair, no outcry of any sort. Converse scratched a match, bent over his man for a moment. He came up, grim and icy eyed.

He got his coat and grip-sack and went down the hall.

He couldn't tell whether it was relief or craven fear that flickered in the clerk's eyes. In any case, it didn't matter. Converse went out into the night and headed for the Bonanza.

CHAPTER V

The Right Fork

A SECOND bunch of trail herd hands had just hit town. The Bonanza was the popular spot at the moment. Saddle mounts lined the rail in front of the place, and a gusty, growing wildness of movement and sound struck Rufe Converse as he pushed open the door and entered.

In the rear the piano was thumping and dancers whirling. Play was going on at the gambling tables and the bar was doing a rushing business. Converse took time to look over the place thoroughly. Cow hands were everywhere. He saw Graham, the cattle buyer, watching the faro layout.

Chief Magland and one of his bartenders were at work behind the mahogany. Converse, looking that way, caught the flicker of Magland's glance, and smiled grimly. Magland looked startled.

A big, yellow haired, golden eyed rider stood at the bar, bottle and glass before him. A man approaching middle age, with a look of authority about him. Converse moved in beside him, spoke quietly.

"I'm guessing you're the boss of some of the cowhands."

The yellow head swung. "That's right. Some of them. What about it?"

"A young cattleman and his sister, Wheeling by name, brought in a small shipping herd," Converse explained. "The buyer paid off Wheeling across the end of this bar, in cash. Forty-eight hundred dollars. Wheeling never got out of town with it. He was knifed, the money taken. I'm going to collect for the sister. If a ruckus breaks, you might hold your riders down."

The golden eyes searched Converse's blue ones with a long, hard, intensity. Then the cattleman nodded. "You talk straight, you look straight. I met a Wheeling, once. Jack Wheeling I think it was. Young fellow. Down in the Pinnacle River country."

"The same Jack Wheeling," said Converse.

"So-o! These cussed trail towns! They all think a cattleman with money in his pocket is fair prey. And they don't care how they get it. Fly to it, friend. If you want help, holler. Me and my boys will tear this place down."

"Thanks!" said Converse. "But I'll handle it—alone."

He pounded a fist on the bar, looked at Chief Magland.

Magland, expressionless now, came along the bar. Converse's smile was mirthless, twisted, sardonic.

"If you're waiting for that knife wield-

ing barkeep of yours, Magland—Slip was what you called him—don't! He won't be back. He's laying over in my hotel room, with his skull caved in. He made his try, but he missed. Now, I'll take that money."

Magland looked over the room, his glance like a stabbing finger, here, there—and there!

Two gamblers pushed away from their tables, got to their feet. The piano quit thumping and the ghost thin man who had been at it, got up and came pushing through the crowd. Nobody noticed the street door of the Bonanza open slightly and Cass Bryson slide in.

The two gamblers and the piano player came all the way to the bar, formed in a loose half circle, watching Rufe Converse. A brittle tension ran over the room, an invisible threat, which sent men pressing back out of line.

The yellow haired cattleman said, "They're set to gang you. I'll be happy to side you, friend."

Converse shook his head. "My cat. I'll skin it. Last chance, Magland. Come across with Jack Wheeling's money!"

Magland's eyes flickered mockingly. From under the bar he lifted a canvas sack which clinked solidly as he dropped it on the mahogany.

"There it is if you're man enough to take it, Converse," he said brazenly.

Now it was Cass Bryson's voice which bit coldly in from the side.

"As town marshal it's my chore to recover that stolen money, Magland. I had no real proof before, but now you've admitted it. You're under arrest, Magland, for complicity in murder and robbery. Watch yourself!"

THERE was surprise that held all in a long moment of frozen silence. Even Rufe Converse knew his start of amaze. But he recovered quickly and said ringingly, "Good man, Bryson! This is as it should be. Magland, you're listening to the law."

Magland cursed contemptuously. "You stupid fool, Bryson! Get out of here before I run you out."

"No!" retorted Bryson, moving in. "These for you."

He dangled a pair of hand-cuffs in his left hand.

The gaunt piano player said, in a sepulchral, death dry voice, "The coyote would be a wolf. We'll see!"

He drew a gun as he spoke, drew and fired all in one move, deadly fast. Cass Bryson gasped, went to his knees. He was dying, but he fought off the icy clutch long enough to push a gun level and get away a single shot. The piano player lunged up on his toes, spun slowly, a grotesque figure, then poured limply down, dead when he hit the floor.

Chief Magland flipped a stubby barreled Derringer from a pocket. His eyes, crimson with intent bored at Rufe Converse, who, blinding fast now that the issue had turned stark and elemental, smashed a shot heart high into Magland's large, sleek body. Magland fell against the bar, his dropping head thumping the mahogany hollowly before he slid limply down from sight.

The two gamblers, frozen by the explosive deadliness of the moment, were under the reeking muzzle of Rufe Converse's gun before they could take any hostile action.

[*Turn page*]

Message from García

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

"Well?"

The single word ripped coldly from Converse's lips.

The gamblers backed up a step, shocked and staring. Their hands began to lift, spread and careful toward their ears. One of them licked dry lips.

"I want no part of this deal," he blurted hoarsely. "I pass."

The second gambler nodded. "Same for me!"

To the golden eyed cattleman, Converse said, "Now you can watch them if you will, friend."

The cattleman said, "Done! I'm watching them."

Converse went over to Cass Bryson, who had slumped over on his side. The town marshal was dead. Converse gently and gravely straightened him on his back. As though speaking to himself, Converse murmured, "Your badge is bright and clean again, Bryson. This time you took the right fork of the trail. You got up off your knees the hard way."

A long sigh rolled across the room, which watched them in silence as Rufe Converse counted the money Magland had put on the bar, then dropped it in his grip-sack.

He looked at the golden eyed cattleman. "Thanks, friend."

The cattleman nodded. "Good riding. I'll take on where you left off. Me and my boys will make this town sit up and beg."

* * * * *

A small fire was still gleaming beside the lonely little water course. The girl and the old rider got to their feet as Rufe Converse rode up. Converse dismounted, untied his grip-sack from behind the saddle cantle, lifted it down, dug the money out of it and handed it to the girl.

"All there," he said quietly. "Forty-eight hundred dollars. If it will be of any comfort to you, the murderer of your brother has paid the full penalty."

Rio, the old rider, stirred up the fire and tucked a blackened coffee pot closer to the flames. He poured a cup and handed it to Converse. Against the deepening chill of the night, the warmth of the fire and the glow of the steaming coffee was good.

The girl sat cross legged beside the flames, the money in her lap. Her head was bent and the fire light gleamed on the tears on her cheeks. But presently her eyes were dry again and she lifted her head and looked at Converse.

"My thanks again, Rufe Converse," she said, her voice low and quiet.

Converse said, "You'll be taking the home trail in the morning?"

She nodded. "And what trail are you going to take?"

CONVERSE mused for a time in grave thoughtfulness. It was still and peaceful here. The raw, biting edge of the old restlessness, the old irritation with himself and life as he had known it, began to dull a little.

"Every trail forks somewhere," he said slowly. "Some of them several times. Always before I've taken the wrong fork, because somehow, it didn't seem to matter too much. But now it does matter. I'm up against another fork in the trail. If I don't take the right fork this time, why then I never will. I'm wondering about that Pinnacle River country. I'm wondering if there is room in it for me, if I'd find the kind of life there I've always wanted, but never could come up with. Tell me about it."

Lucy Wheeling did. She told of a river of sweet, never failing water giving life and richness to fat range. She told of cattle and grass, of a country that was clean and challenging to all of a man's best efforts and dreams and rewards.

She had deep wisdom, this Lucy Wheeling. She could see what was in the mind of this lean, brooding man across the fire from her, and his locked away hidden loneliness, guess his deep yearning for the solid worthwhile things of life. All these things, she made plain to him, he might find in this Pinnacle River range.

When she finished Converse looked at her and found her eyes meeting his fairly.

"You make it a land of promise, Lucy Wheeling," he said. "I'm going there—with you."

She colored warmly, her eyes holding steady.

"I'm glad, Rufe Converse."

"Another fork of the trail," said Converse softly. "The last one—and the right one!"

MOON GAZERS

They spied a pair of riders and thought maybe these were the Humberts

By BARRY SCOBEE

The Humbert cousins were tough—but those McGuire boys outsmarted them in a little game of rustling!

FOR A while, the idea of the two McGuire brothers starting themselves up in the cattle business gave the neighbors a good many chuckles. People particularly could not understand Buford, who was taking the lead. For he had been raised up a cowboy until he was a growed-up man, eighteen or twenty years old at least.

Several persons remembered this because they had known his father, bitter-tongued old "Whip" McGuire, who couldn't take nothin' off nobody. So why would Buford, with that training behind him, use such poor judgment as to start off things by building their house 'way up

on the high slopes toward the rimrock where water had to be hauled to make the 'dobe bricks?

Mebbe he just clean forgot you had to have water—heh-heh-heh! Or mebbe, said the more poetic people, the brothers wanted to be up there clost to the stars where they could grin back at the moon!

And why'd the two buy land on the mesa above the rim there where you couldn't pasture in winter and where the winds would blow cattle plumb off! And where you'd have to drill down ten thousand feet to reach stock water?

Now if it was Pool, the older brother, deciding these matters, it would be comprehensible. For Pool had wearied of his dad's lashing vocabulary and his trouble-making with the neighbors at the ripe age of fourteen or so and gone over the hill to roll his own life. He tossed in with circuses and carnivals, built himself up a circuit of county fairs through the Central States. Or so old Whip had said with considerable pride, a while before he kicked the bucket.

Now what would a man who had lead that sort of trampish life know about the intricacies of the cow business? But Buford—

Only, as it turned out, the brothers found water on the mesa at about three hundred feet, which was not really a very deep well. But said the folks in the lower country, with deploring shakes of the head to one another and maybe a few winks and grins, the McGuires would find out they'd have to use a twenty-foot windmill to lift water three hundred feet, and the high winds up there would wrench such a big mill-fan out of shape, or blow the whole tower down.

Folks were disappointed, though, over their prophecies on this score, because the brothers put in one of those new-fangled pop-pop gasoline engines. And piped water out over the mesa and made it the best range in the entire region. Furthermore they piped water over the rim and down to their cozy home, and distributed it from there over the slopes, making water plentifully available for their cattle at no maintenance cost except the orginal pumping of it.

And the cattle they started with! A good run of stocker cows of mixed breed, and half a dozen Hereford bulls that cost a hundred and seventy-five bucks apiece. Putting high-priced bulls like that upon the mesa for the panthers to kill! It was outragin', to common-sense! Moon-gazer stuff!

NOW POOL didn't stay on the ranch much the first year, and when the weather warmed up in the second springtime he was gone again, off to the peanut-and-popcorn circuits, leaving Buford to look after their first small branding and to watch the high-country range.

When the November gales began to blow and the time was at hand to bring the cows and calves and bulls down from the mesa, why the same winterish winds blew Pool home too, with his carnival paraphernalia, and he stored the stuff in a dry cellar room and told Buford with high satisfaction:

"I'm off the road forever, brother. This land, now—" He made a sweeping gesture out over the endless miles of sunny, gracious slopes below them, clear down to the distant desert floor, and his eyes were the eyes of a man who sees his home and happiness for the rest of his days. "A man here, Buff, can forget the little dimes of the rackets and grow him a soul like real folks. That's no reflection on the boys and girls of the lemonade routes, because they're all wool and a yard wide, bless 'em. But this here is different. After all it's home, Dad's home and your home, and mine, too. Kid, how's everything?"

"Darn near everything is okay, Pool."

"Spill it, Kid."

"Well, the tail end of October I brought down from the mesa twenty-one cows and their late calves, 'fore an early winter wind could hit and hurt the little fellers. I put them down where you see the green brush against the yellow grass on that slope-side flat. See?"

"Four miles down and slantin' to the right, huh?"

"That's it. Four days ago I rode down there to see are they all doing fine. And I'm—I mean we—are short five calves. Their mamas were still worried and hunting for them."

"Whose stuff is over that way, now?" murmured Pool, pointing.

"The Humberts'," Buford said.

"Shucks. Pa didn't like 'em either, 'way

back eighteen, twenty years ago when they were rowdy kids."

"The cousins are running lots of cattle nowadays, Pool."

"But they need five of ours, eh? Five calves is a lot of potential beef for two country lads like you and me to lose. Would you recognize the family resemblance?"

"I'd know ever cow and calf we've got, Pool, in the Fort Worth stockyards with a thousand others."

"Hah, the cowboy brag. Or maybe it ain't, seeing you've lived with 'em. What are we waiting on?"

"I've been waiting on you, Pool."

"Let's saddle and ride, then," Pool concluded.

"At sunup in the morning."

The brothers penetrated far into what the Humbert cousins, "Buck" and Leed, called "their" country, though they owned only a section here and there. The rest of it was public land, desert stuff, too poor to own and pay taxes on. It would support maybe three or four cows to the square mile.

Pool and Buford let their stuff range on such land, and they claimed some of it as their country the same as the Humberts did.

The Humbert cousins weren't men to spend money for wells on land they did not own. But on the sections they had taken up, where there were seeps or springs, they had spent a little money for posts and wire and put up fence around small, holding pastures. And in one of these spots, with some cows penned up for feeding and some old bulls they were getting ready to market as canners, the McGuire brothers found their five calves, twenty miles from their house under the rim.

"You plumb certain, bub?" Pool asked his young brother.

"Sure, like I said." Buford answered with certainty.

"Okay, you know 'em. What next? Take 'em home?"

"Nope," Buford said shortly.

"You scared of 'em, the Humberts, Kid?"

"Nope. They'd only steam them back, and more. Remember Dad used to say, 'stick to the law'?"

"He was right, too."

"So we stick. And the way to do it is to go to town and tell the law Cousin Buck and Cousin Leed are cow thieves."

"What we waiting on?" Pool demanded.

"They won't like it, Pool. They're big hombres. They're big in the chest. Big in the fists. They lug guns around. They stomp on people and laugh."

"They do McGuires thataway? You and me?"

"Not any, but I thought I'd warn you. They're great hands to laugh and laugh."

"Yeah," said Pool thoughftully, "laughing can cut deep. That your meaning, brother?"

"Maybe so. It's thirty miles from here to town."

"Lead on, Kid."

THERE was still some afternoon left when they rode into the dusty county seat. They aimed their horses at the one-story, adobe courthouse. It had a front and two wings, which formed a patio.

It was in this packed-earth, match-littered, open-sided square that they found Sheriff Bailey squatting and whittling with another man. By the time Buford and Pool had wet down their gullets at the shallow wall in the patio, the stranger had closed his knife and departed and the sheriff was unlimbering himself with an inquiring and affable look.

"Well, well," he began jovially, "how're the McGuire brothers from the high mesa? From the house the cliff swallers built?"

"Jokes never grow old with you, do they, sheriff?" said Buford, smiling but cuttingly sarcastic, too. "It's a nice way to live your life—always young and with jokes that never grow stale."

"Oh, I don't know," said the sheriff, all affability dropping away from him. "What's on your intellects?"

"Stolen calves on mine," said Buford.

"I'll take the same," said Pool.

"You naming the thieves?"

"The Cousins Humbert," said Buford.

"Buck and Leed in person," said Pool.

"Them!" Sheriff Bailey was startled. "You sure biting you off a chaw. They've growed up to be big men, two ways. You sure you ain't riding a mistake?"

"We saw our calves in their holding pen, with the 'HUM' brand on them," Buford stated.

"You boys making talk with blood and fists in it," the sheriff mused. "Maybe moonlight's got in your eyes, 'way up yonder agin the rimrock."

"You still being comic, Sheriff," said Buford. "What we've come to town for, if it ain't imposing on your valuable time, is to swear out a warrant and have the Cousins Humbert pinched for cow stealing."

"Best way to settle this," said Sheriff Bailey, "is to have a conference, a little powwow with Buck and Leed. They're over to the Nickelodion Bar doin' 'em a little drinking this afternoon. Talk with them might straighten all this out without no hard feelings. Let's go."

The McGuire brothers looked at each other and shook their heads. They'd felt all along that the deck was stacked against them, where the big Humberts were involved. They swung along after the prancing sheriff.

On the business street the store clerks and such like good people were moving toward home and supper. Some of them knew and spoke to Buford in friendly fashion. Fewer knew Pool, having seen him so little, and some looked at him with amusement, because he wore the only stiff katy hat in the country. A cowboy with a stiff katy!

Pool would have abandoned it when he first returned to the country had he not seen and heard too many people laughing at him. This got up in him the contrariness that he had inherited from old Whip McGuire, and he was determined to wear the stiff lid until it broke up and fell off from old age.

Moreover, their presence with the sheriff helped also to attract attention, so that some of the home-goers began to drag their steps and loiter to see what it was all about.

Then as Bailey and the brothers neared the Nickelodion, who should come out with their great rolling laughter but the Humberts themselves. Big men, six feet and three inches, with hats tilted back showing wide-open faces and broad foreheads. Laughing, rattling, noisy men feeling the oats of their success as up-and-coming cowmen. And of course they saw Pool and his stiff hat immediately.

"Well, well," boomed Buck, thwacking his Cousin Leed across the back in great good humor, "if it ain't our little neighbor from up on the Milky Way, back from the circus sawdust and popcorn whistles! Hi, Mac, put it there!"

He seized Pool's hand before Pool could prevent it. He jerked Pool so hard, purposely, in his make-believe joy to see him that he snapped Pool's hat off. The hard thing went rolling, and Leed, playing the monkey, kicked wildly at it and pretended to run, as if it were a rattler or a skunk.

Other men had come from the saloon, and numerous ones had stopped along the sidewalk, so that now quite a crowd was around to witness this horseplay. All at once the crowd was silent, watching the McGuire brothers, some of that crowd remembering old wildcat Whip McGuire.

OUT OF the silence Sheriff Bailey spoke up, with something of a squeak in his voice: "Buck, Leed—me and these boys, Pool and Buford, we kinda wanted to see you a minute."

"You lookin' at us, ain't you?" said Leed.

"In private would be best," said the sheriff cautiously, because Buck and Leed were just a mite past a drink or two.

"Right here suits me," said Buford McGuire, because he had no wish to meet these two men right now in a dark corner. Not that the McGuires were afraid, but he and Pool just hit five feet ten and these Humberts were high as hills. Anyhow, on impulse, he thought it was a good idea to air the situation before a lot of people.

"You Cousins Humbert," he said frankly, "Pool and me came to town to swear out a warrant against you for cattle thieving. Only, Sheriff Bailey is kinda reluctant to help out with justice."

"That ain't true," yelped Bailey.

"Cattle thievin'?" said Buck Humbert, as if doubting his ears. "Me and Leed?"

"That's right," said Buford cheerfully. "The five calves you picked up a few days back and have got now in your holding pen at Lick Spring."

Buck's face held a humorous look, but not his eyes, which were scanning swiftly over the watching, waiting crowd. Then, perhaps it being the only thing he could get away with, he tilted back his head and began to laugh.

"Me and Leed stealin' cattle!" he

chortled. "When we got more now than we know what to do with! And from the Moonbeam brothers, too!"

Leed caught the cue. They were a great pair to follow one another's lead. He guffawed and howled with merriment, he pulled off his big hat and slapped his legs with it. He laughed until he had to put out a hand against the saloon wall to steady himself. The crowd laughed too. Even Buford and Pool caught the contagion and laughed a little.

But such laughter can't last without it being kindled by something else funny, and there seemed to be no kindling handy. So all at once a terrific silence was on the crowd.

"We've thought before, at times," said Buford, "that the Humberts were stealing a calf from us now and then, when it came handy for them. We know it now. We want them arrested and tried. We want the sheriff and a couple of good witnesses to go with us in the morning—"

"I can't go in the morning," cut in the sheriff. He spoke then to tall, slim old District Court Judge Ephraim Jones. "I ain't summonsed the juries yet for week after next, your honor. I've got to do it tomorrow. Can't delay another day."

"Witness for what?" said old Judge Jones, looking suspicious and doubtful and unfriendly at Buford.

The young McGuire answered him:

"We'll drive our mama cows toward the Humberts' pen and they can drive the calves toward us, 'bout ten miles for both sides. If our cows recognize the calves as theirs, why Buck and Leed, the laughing cousins from Sillyville, are cow thieves!"

Judge Jones turned and looked questioningly at Sheriff Bailey.

"Why sure, certain," said Bailey. "That's the way to do it. Gimme three days to get the juries called and I'll go with you Buff, you and Pool."

"Three days more and it will be too late for the cows to know their calves by smell," said Buford.

"Best I can do," said Bailey.

Another silence, every eye watching the McGuire brothers to see what they might do next. And it was Pool who took the prod now.

"All right, folks, the McGuires lose," he said. "Just like Pa used to say, 'The law ain't for the Irish like us.' I can laugh, too. Irish in America for five big long generations! We lose here and now, Buford and me. But an old hound of the peanut circuits like me ain't going to lose everything! My hat, for instance. Buck, you jerked it off. Pick it up and hand it to me."

"Yeah?" drawled Buck, unbelieving. And he put out a foot and shoved the rusty black derby scooting toward Pool.

Pool stepped around the hat and nearer to Buck Humbert. "I want you to pick it up and brush it off and hand it to me," said Pool.

"Wantin' ain't gittin'!"

POOL McGUIRE used a simple little trick he had seen circus cops use on truculent canvasmen. He slapped hard for Buck Humbert's eyes. In the surprise of the instant, Humbert threw up both hands to protect himself. With his left hand Pool lifted Buck's six-gun from its leather and jumped back, tossing the gun to his right fist and pointing it at Buck's midriff.

Before anybody spoke Pool and Buford sensed the crowd was surprised and awed and maybe a little pleased at Pool's quick trick. Not everybody admired the Humbert cousins. And old Judge Jones was looking at Pool very narrowly. Then Pool spoke:

"Can't wait too long, Buck. And the hat, you know. We've got to be riding for home, and it's a fifty-mile jog up to where the stars shine and the moon grins down at honest people."

"I ain't a-goin' to pick up your hat, Mister," said Buck.

"Brush it off and hand it to me," Pool ordered. "If you don't Humbert, I'll put new bending places in your legs"—Pool flipped the revolver in his fist to indicate his meaning—"so you can kneel down to my old derby."

"You'll shoot me?" said Buck Humbert, amazed.

"Not to kill. But to break your legs. Now, Humbert. I mean now!"

And Buck Humbert jumped, all spraddled out. He went down, his great shoulders and torso between the snout of the gun and his legs, so that if Pool shot he would have to shoot Buck in the back. And Buck came up with the derby gripped by the brim in both hands.

Before Pool could be aware of what was intended Buck, higher and bigger, jammed the hat down on Pool's head and pulled it over his ears and eyes and nose. He snatched the revolver from Pool's fist. Then with the edge of his hand he chopped at the brim of the derby.

The entire brim of the age-brittled hat broke off and dropped around Pool's neck.

Suddenly the whole throng of people was laughing. Guffawing, haw-hawing, bending over, holding to one another, leaning against walls and hitch-racks. Pool stood there making no motion to free himself from the ridiculous wreck of the hat, that was down to the tip of his nose and was making his ears stand out like wings.

Only Buford did not laugh. "Get it off!" he rasped at his brother, and himself pushed the crown of the derby up from Pool's eyes and neck and flung it away.

Pool did not lose his dignity. He stared levelly for a moment at the Humbert cousins, and it was Buck, with his six-gun in hand, whose gaze wavered. Then Pool scanned the crowd, slowly, levelly, hushing the laughter, wiping off their fading grins. And that finished, he took his younger brother's arm and steered a way to their horses in front of the courthouse.

"We took an awful beating," said Pool, when they were in saddle and passing from the edge of town.

"From the crowd," said Buford, "and because the sheriff wouldn't take a look at the calves."

"Too late for that anyhow, maybe," Pool said. "Away from their mothers too long, likely, for the mothers to claim them."

"The Humberts will steal us blind, now," Buford said bitterly.

"Yeah, to even up for today for being called cow thieves. Unless we gun 'em."

"Or trick 'em and trap 'em," said Buford. "I got an idea dawnin' over the horizon."

Getting back, in the moon-bright night, toward their own country, Buford suggested that they stop and see Dave Hines, who was running cattle in the region. The family, still up and around a table with a kerosene lamp, welcomed the brothers in a way.

Pool and Buford told in minute detail what had happened in town. The Hines family grinned and giggled and were highly entertained and amused. Well, weren't these the sons of old, funny cantankerous Whip McGuire? Weren't these the men who had built a house away up against the rim, that was a hard haul with supplies? And bought mesa land to drill a deep well? And Pool wearing that funny, stiff katy.

Only the house under the rim and the mesa well had turned out better than anybody else's ranch ventures hereabouts, giving fairly cheap water to a considerable area of grass. And that kinda throwed the countryside's laugh back in their faces. Which wasn't too easy to take.

Buford finished their tale with, "Steal from one, steal from another."

THAT wiped all smirks and good clean fun—at the McGuires' expense—off Dave Hines' weathered face. He got up and paced a step or two, and blurted out:

"I been missing yearlings lately. Dog take my hide if I don't think it was them! If I could ketch them at it—"

"I've got a notion," said Buford, quietly.

Hines looked as if he was about to say that Buford had had other notions. Then he looked further, as if remembering that said notions had turned out to McGuire advantage, and said instead:

"Let's hear."

"The Humberts," said Buford, "are going to raid me and Pool, wipe up all our cattle they can, to get even with us and to show people in this neck of the range to keep hands off the big cousins. They won't be careful about taking just our stuff. They'll sort of lap over on the neighbors, if you get what I mean.

"Tell you, Mr. Hines, you bring Birdie Sells and John Grindstaff up to our Swallow's Nest tomorrow and I'll spill my notion to you-all. I think it's good, for moon-gazing McGuires. And don't go spilling the beans that we've got something up our sleeves."

"You think I'm a sieve?" Hines threw back, miffed by Buford's implication that he might be loose-tongued.

Buford didn't reply. The brothers departed then. A mile or two from the house, as they jogged on homeward, Pool said:

"Glad you didn't soften up and answer Hines. It kinda left him thinking. Us McGuires have got to start giving these people the hard lip to build us up some of the good old respect. Most people around here think that boys who have associated—as they suppose—with the bearded lady and the living skeleton, are funny. Especially if one wears a derby."

At that, Buford tittered. Pool chuckled. Then they both laughed. And in a minute they were holding to their horses' manes and rocking in their saddles, laughing like fools in the empty moonlit range.

"Guess I did look funny," conceded Pool when he could speak. "No wonder that crowd laughed!"

The next day Hines brought Sells and Grindstaff to see them. The brothers hauled out some of Pool's carnival paraphernalia. When Buford explained and illustrated, the three ranchmen fell for it like, as Pool later said, "suckers on the popcorn circuit."

"Remember," Buford cautioned them, "at least one of you has got to be here every day. No time to lose. Court's week after next. I'll bait the trap with cheese. Things ought to pick up then, two-three days from now."

The cheese in the trap was more cattle to make it easy and profitable stealing for the Humberts. This was accomplished by the McGuire brothers driving down from the mesa summer pasture every last head of their cattle and distributing them well over the lower winter-grass half-desert range, a few miles below the swallow-nest house and where some of the cattle of Hines, Sells and Grindstaff would be likely to stray.

One of the days when Buford and Pool were scattering their cattle they spied a pair of riders and thought maybe they were the Humberts. But at closer inspection they found the two to be old Judge Jones, a living shoestring on a horse, and the judge's hired kid who looked after Jones' saddle-horse.

When the judge was approached he gave the McGuires a suspicious stare and headed away aloofly without stopping for any conversation.

"He's got a notion we may be doing some thieving ourselves," commented Pool.

"He's Mister X," said Buford. "The unknown quantity. Maybe he'll favor the Humbert cousins same as the sheriff did, when we get to court."

Three days later the thing happened that Buford had hoped for and was far from certain would happen. Hines, Grindstaff and Sells, greedy for the fun and the big opportunity, were present on the McGuire porch, high up there, and saw it. And Buford and Pool saw, too. Five witnesses.

The next step in the scheme was for Hines and Buford to ride to town and get the warrants attended to. This time they went to the justice of the peace. He was an old acquaintance of Hines, and after listening a while he penned his John Henry on a good airtight legal complaint and issued the warrants for Buck and Leed Humbert and told the sheriff to serve them.

Buford and Hines waited around for Bailey to bring in the pair of cattle thieves and hear them yelp.

"Why, you two dad-blasted leaky lips!" Buck Humbert roared. "When this is over we'll sue you moon-grazers for every last cent you're worth. The savings you salted down from vendin' toy balloons will go ploop! You'll have to go back to sellin' hump-backed, double-jointed Louisiany peanuts to get cash to pay us the damages for false arrest!"

BUFORD and Pool felt that sword hanging over them as they rode down the next week to court, where they had to prove that the Humberts were cattle thieves. For the first time since they had come back to their home country and started ranching they had friendly and enthusiastic backing in the shape of their three neighbors, Hines, Sells and Grindstaff.

"Now listen, men," Buford cautioned them in the hour that the trial was to start, "remember our plan. And when the lawyers try to make you tell when and where and how you saw them stealing and branding our cattle, just tell them you'd rather not say. Stick to it like gum on your shoe sole. Then we'll spring Exhibit A on 'em and get a verdict of gulity—I hope!"

The district attorney had to be told what Exhibit A was. And he fell in with it enthusiastically, or else the idea would

have fallen flat. He went to trial with a grin on his rocky mug, and when the jury of twelve good men and curious was ready, and the preliminaries were finished, the district attorney asked Hines the breathless question:

"Dave, did you see Buck and Leed Humbert, the defendants here, roping and branding calves and yearlings that didn't belong to them?"

"Yessir," affirmed Hines.

"To whom did the said animals belong?"

"To Buford and Pool McGuire."

"That's all. The defense may inquire."

"Mr. Hines," began the Humberts' lawyer, "where were you when you saw, as you say, my clients roping and branding McGuire cattle?"

"Oh, up around where they were doing the stealing," Hines said airily.

"Up around where— That means nothing. How close to them were you?"

"I'd ruther not say."

"You'd rather not say?" The lawyer went a bit red in the face, and he shook a finger and raised his voice. "Hines, how near were you to those men you say were stealing cattle? Answer me!"

Hines fidgeted. "Well, 'bout four mile."

"Four miles!" yelled the attorney. "Could you distinguish men at four miles and see them roping and branding?"

"Yessir." Hines was firm in his answer.

"How? How, Hines?"

"I'd ruther not say."

The lawyer skipped over the floor and shook a fist at Hines, and panted for breath, and shouted at the judge, and was interrupted then by the D.A. The latter said calmly to the court that, if the court pleased, another witness would be brought to the stand to say what Dave Hines hesitated to testify to.

After some wordy discussion and explaining, Judge Jones agreed to hold the matter in abeyance until the district attorney could make good or take the consequences.

The D.A. put Sells on the stand and got the same results as from Hines. Then Grindstaff duplicated the testimony of the other two, by which time the Humbert lawyer was all but insane.

"It's getting to be about time—" began the judge.

"Yes, yes," said the D.A. hurriedly. "I'm ready now, sir, to show my appreciation of Your Honor's very kind indulgence. If you will permit these witnesses to step from the courtroom a few minutes, they will bring in Exhibit A, which will clarify our testimony—I hope, sir."

Crusty, suspicious of the attorney for the State, gloomy as any dispeptic, ready to throw the case out of court, Judge Jones passed out a few threats, then reluctantly gave permission for Exhibit A to be brought in.

With Hines, Sells, Grindstaff and Buford lugging the thing in, and Pool taking care that it did not teeter and overturn, a canvas-covered object was set up at one side of the room, near a window. It might have been an artillery piece, a huge photographer's camera, or even a young camel. Buck Humbert thought of something else:

"A peanut roaster!" he sneered.

Then the D.A. had Buford on the witness stand.

"Mr. McGuire," said he, "did you at the specified date and place see the two Humbert cousins roping and branding your cattle?"

"I sure did!" Buford said with certainty.

"How?" queried the district attorney.

"I shall be glad to illustrate, if the court will permit. It'll at the same time put the hing-dingus on the testimony of the other three witnesses."

"You mean clarify it?" put in the judge. And as Buford nodded: "Well, for goodness sake go on and clarify it then," snorted the judge. "I'm getting thoroughly bored by all this tomfoolery!"

BUFORD tripped over to the covered object, plucked off the canvas, and revealed a telescope of the type seen at county fairs and the like, through which the curious can have a look at the moon for a dime, or a nickel.

Pool, with a nice professional air, took over. He raised the window and focused the telescope on some distant object evidently beyond the town's roofs. Then he began to speak:

"Your honor, sir, and the attorneys, and gentlemen of the most efficient jury, and audience, we have here a telescope of such capacity and range that it brings to the human eye the surface of the moon with unbelievable bleakness and desolation. It's so close it startles you, freezes

you. This imported telescope, brought across the ocean wild, was once the toy of the king of England. He released it only with the understanding that it would be used for the enlightenment of mankind, and for a pro-prodigious"—Pool always stammered on that word—"sum of cash in hand!

"Ladies and gentlemen, come and look, come and look, bring the kiddies! Start their edjucation! Come and look! This wonderful telescope is so powerful, brings the moon so close, that you cannot see all its surface at once. In fact, less than half. A man once asked if you could see dandruff in the hair of the man on the moon—"

"A very nice talk, a nice talk," broke in old Judge Jones, fairly beaming. "I think you could take that to the church festival tonight, Mr.—er—Pool, and give the society a portion of the proceeds. I myself would like to see the moon through it. If—er—it is now your idea for the jurors to look through it to establish—er—visible jurisdiction—"

The D.A. broke up the speech by winking and thumbing at the jury, whereupon they came spilling out of the jury pen and went trooping for the moon gun. William Honeywell, the jury foreman, was the first to squat at the eyepiece and peer through. The whole filled courtroom was watching, and they saw him jerk his head away and jump up and look through the window.

"For mercy's sake," he murmured, "I thought she was hitting me in the eye with a rope!"

The crowd giggled eerily. Buford gave a quick look through the telescope. Yup, it was as he had arranged. The prettiest girl in town, dressed in cowboy togs, sat her horse out beyond the edge of town, twirling her rope and grinning right into his own grin, she was that close. No wonder the foreman thought he had been hit in the eye with the rope!

Then an eager hand pushed Buford aside and Judge Jones himself was squatting at the eyepiece. He, too, jerked his head back at the nearness of the image, and looked again, then asked Buford:

"Did you arrange for that girl—Bessie Jo, and the others to be out there?"

"Yes, Your Honor," said Buford. "I promised them if they would help us out, they could use the telescope at the church festival tonight."

"How far away are they? Remember, you are answering as a sworn witness."

"At Townsend's Pens—little over four miles."

"You jurors hear that?" said the judge. "By the way, where was the telescope when you witnesses saw—say you saw—the Humberts stealing calves?"

"On the porch of our Swallow Nest house," Buford answered.

"You jurors take a look," said the court, "and consider the facts."

The trial was finished within an hour, with a verdict of guilty. Judge Jones did some more looking through the telescope, as tickled as a kid. The pretty girl was gone by now, so he was looking at houses in the town. All at once he straightened up with a startled grunt and a blushing face.

"Looked right into a hotel window," he murmured. Then, to hide embarrassment and retain his judicial dignity: "You men bring that thing to my house after the church festival, will you? I'd like to study the stars for a few nights."

"Sure will, Judge," said Pool.

"Moreover," said the judge, "I'll say I've ridden around over your country some lately, seeing what I could see. I want to congratulate you sons of old Whip McGuire for your industry and good character."

Behind the court's back Pool winked at Buford and Buford winked back, as much as to say, "Well, we're winning back, here in our own native neck of the woods."

"I've got to go buy me a hat," Pool said then, "and it won't be a derby!"

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith Are at Their Funniest and Best in HORSE-SHOE LUCK, Next Issue's Featured Novelet by W. C. TUTTLE!

GHOST TOWN PAST

Poke dropped to one knee and angled his gun

The pot of gold Poke Stratton sought was far different from the one he found!

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

FROM the summit of the Cerbat range old "Poke" Stratton looked down on the ghost town where it lay in the angle of a river and a sparkling lake. Through the shimmering radiations of the hot morning sun it looked like any small town with the usual assortment of buildings. Poke emitted a dry chuckle through his white beard at the thought. For more than

forty years the only inhabitants of Cerbat City had been pack rats and horned toads. Even the lake and the river were mirages, put there by a too vivid memory.

It took Poke most of the day clambering over hot rocks and through cacti to get down from the summit with his two burros. The jenny was the fifth he'd owned to be called "Golden Mary." The smaller burro was "Skat."

Towards night Poke shuffled off a ridge into the gulch. Where it widened out he was forced to trace around the edge of an old tailings dump. It had been laid down layer by layer years before from the Kopec mine higher up the gulch.

When the burros picked up their long hairy ears, Poke had just discovered the white rag on a stake driven into the side of the dump. This meant human beings somewhere around. Curious, he climbed the few feet necessary to examine the marker. Figures on the wood told him this was a survey stake.

A thrill shot through his rheumatic bones at the thought that Cerbat City would come to life again and once more be the boom city of his youth. But immediately he quit fancy dreaming. Poke was a realist. He'd known Cerbat City in the past, and knew, too, that all paying minerals had long since played out. No, Cerbat City was destined to remain dead.

Against the end of rock wall that marked the beginning of the gulch a tiny trickle of water fell from a ledge, drying nearly as fast as it touched the parched earth. Procuring the kegs carried by Skat, Poke filled them to pack on to night camp.

Many marks made by shoes and flat heeled boots covered the ground around the seep spring. This didn't surprise Poke because the stake had prepared him for the presence of signs made by men. He left the spring by way of the path they had made and found their camp on the edge of the flat.

There were indications that it had been abandoned suddenly and in panic. Through his startled surprise Poke felt a strange uneasiness. Warped boards from the ghost town had been used to form a corral and to hold up a pair of open end tents. Sleeping tarps, cooking utensils, packages of food lay in disorder, testifying to the swiftness of the departure.

POKE'S desert wise eyes read sign on the ground. Three men had ridden southward, and two loose pack mules had followed them. Nowhere did Poke find tracks of pursuers, men who might have been bent on mischief. He left the area, puzzled that he had found no reason for this hasty flight.

He turned slowly westward, taking a cob pipe from a shirt pocket and thoughtfully tamping and lighting it. Half a mile away were the crumbling ruins of Cerbat City. Had danger come from there that caused the campers to depart in the night? Poke didn't believe in ghosts, though he knew some who swore the place to be haunted by long dead men. Uneasily Poke surveyed his immediate surroundings. Not even the sand stirred in the light breeze in that cauldron of waste land.

Poke's shaggy hair, straggling beneath his floppy hat, moved as he shook his head in perplexity. The sudden departure of those men bothered him so much that he ambled over to Golden Mary and exploring under the ragged tarp cover, produced a cartridge belt and walnut handled gun and strapped it on.

The sun on the horizon shone red and gold against the ghost town as the burros trotted before Poke into Cerbat City. Old metal roofs were rusted iron; the wooden and tar paper ones had long ago rotted away and had fallen in, as had most of the walls. Only one building was of stone construction, less than a dozen of adobe.

Nothing amiss was in evidence. The wind-riffled sand of what had been the main street was unmarked. The burros now moved faster, Golden Mary throwing her head up to bray loudly. Poke smiled. Burros were smarter than most folks believed. This pair knew exactly where camp would be pitched and they would be relieved of their loads. Always, late in the summer, Poke paused here on his trip south to the county seat on the railroad to replenish his supply of grub. For forty years or more

Poke had sought without success the prospector's dream at the foot of the rainbow.

His eyes drifted to the left where stood a few posts upright about the old boothill cemetery. Long ago the staples had fallen out, letting the wires fall to the ground to rust and crumble.

Only a few graves had rock headstones. The others had been marked by boards, mostly blank, and now rotted off even with the sand, except for a particular one in the southwest corner. On this one a name and a date had been inscribed in paint which protected the wood it covered and so, in some measure, insured its enduring. Blowing sand had gradually cut away the wood around the paint until letters and figures stood deep against the grain. The board bore the simple inscription:

GOLDEN MARY
1882

To Poke she had been a romantic mystery that had taken on greater substance with the passing of time, and it had pleased him to perpetuate her name in that of one of his four-footed companions of the desert. None in Cerbat City had ever known the winsome, golden-haired lass by any other name, and they had guessed her age as nineteen. All her admirers had known definitely was the date of her death. Nothing more. She had come to the Palace Saloon with "Slick" Edmunds the gambler. She was a slender, beautiful girl with heart-shaped face, who sang from a small stage built especially for her under the lookout's porch in the end wall of the Palace.

When he drew abreast of the place now, Poke looked at it thoughtfully. More of the front had fallen in since his last visit, he noticed. He could see through to the back wall where the stage was and the perch where the guard once sat with a shotgun across his lap. The bar on the left side sagged in the middle, and the potbellied stove lay broken in a mass of glass. Piles of pack rat collections and sand littered the floor.

Next to the Palace stood one side and the end wall of adobe of what had been the Cerbat City Mercantile Company. The two burros were half way down the wall now, inside, standing patiently over the darkened ground of an old campfire bed.

Coming up to them Poke unloaded, scratched their heads and slapped them out of the way. They rolled on the ground, brayed a few times and wandered off through the ruins. Again Poke remembered that burros were smart. Better than watch dogs. No strangers were close, there was nothing to arouse their deep-seated curiosity.

In the falling dusk Poke smoked the cob pipe, straightened camp and piled up some fragments of wood to boil coffee and cook a bite to eat. Strangely tonight his mind kept returning to those final, roaring, glorious days of Cerbat City. In the still, soft night, with stars breaking out overhead, the streets once more swarmed with bearded, heavy-handed men who laughed and talked in rough raillery of the times.

None of them had read aright the ominous signs to doom. Poke had often marveled, in his years of searching for gold, that no one had foreseen the outcome of what had happened, beginning with the night the outbound stage was robbed.

Stages crossed the desert from Cerbat City to Hardy's Ferry on the Colorado River after nightfall because of the heat. On this occasion, the stage was held up and robbed four miles from town. The driver and guard were shot dead without warning. The loot consisted of five bars of gold worth ten thousand dollars each. There had been no passengers, for Cerbat City enjoyed a one-way traffic in them then. Actually the gold bars from the Kopec mine had been the last shipment of any importance from Cerbat City.

A pair of prospectors had found the murdered men and the stage. They sped on to town, heading naturally for the Palace where most men would be congregated. Poke, then only eighteen, had been there, too. The place had been filled solidily that night. Golden Mary was singing her third or fourth encore. She swung her wide, flowing skirts, showing her tiny feet encased in black satin slippers, and waved a pic-

turesque little hat from its silken strings at the roaring, insistent spectators who refused to let her quit.

THE news of the holdup brought an instant, uneasy silence over the place. Standing against the west wall where he had been watching Golden Mary, Poke had caught sight of Slick Edmunds across the throng. The gambler was sweating heavily. He wiped his flushed face and tucked the silk handkerchief into one of his sleeves. Immaculate was the word for the handsome Edmunds and explained why he was named "Slick."

Slick Edmunds had killed at least three men in Cerbat City, and rumor held it was because they had paid too much attention to Golden Mary. Slick watched her with jealous eyes and a ready gun so that few men dared pay open attention to her. On this night, while excitement rose over the wanton double murder and robbery, Poke observed that Slick did not become the least bit ruffled.

On the contrary the gambler's glinting eyes danced dangerously across the room to Jim Vogelsong. Vogelsong was one man he couldn't cow. He paid court to the vivacious Golden Mary whenever he came to town from the Kopec mine, which he had discovered.

From the first day Vogelsong gave his attention to the girl, men had waited for Slick Edmunds to kill him. But it was evil-visaged Burr Johnson, one of Slick's cronies who did for the mine owner, shooting him from behind during a saloon brawl. One group of enraged citizens pursued Johnson across the river into California, while another buried Vogelsong in boothill.

Nothing was ever found of the gold or the slayers' of the stage driver and guard. Events moved swiftly after the crime, so that it soon became merely one incident in a long line of them. Edmunds, caught slickering a deck of cards, killed the man who called his hand, and the man was unarmed.

Slick Edmunds beat an angry posse across the river as his crony had. Long afterwards the news reached Cerbat City that he had joined up again with Johnson, and later still, that the pair of them had been sent up for an especially savage murder in Jimtown. But this news created no stir in Cerbat City, for another, saddening event had happened meanwhile.

A west bound stage was attacked by Indians. The driver, the guard and five passengers were slain. Among them was Golden Mary who, not knowing that Slick Edmunds was already in the toils of the law, was setting out to join him. They brought her back to Cerbat City with the other dead. She was put in a plain wooden box, and Poke, half-blinded by tears, helped bury her.

Soon after this tragic happening the Kopec mine closed. Then followed, in rapid order, the Shookey Jones, Big Lode and the Black Rock. The ore had played out. Men and goods turned in the opposite direction, going toward the river crossing in a steady stream. In another month's time, of the five thousand persons who once inhabited Cerbat City, not a living soul remained.

Poke went with the tag-end of the migration. He returned a few years later, like a few other die-hards, hoping to uncover pay dirt in ground already worked out. He had been at it ever since, had grown old and gray, and was left now without much hope for the future. It was too late to turn back. He still had the dreams of yesteryear, of Cerbat City and what might have been.

Of the others who slept in boothill Poke remembered Wally Rosenberg, who had owned the mercantile company. Wally had said one night, to friends in the Palace, that there wasn't much mystery concerning the perpetrators of the stage robbery and the double murder. The very next morning he was found with his throat slit in his living quarters in the rear of the store. . . .

Poke came out of his dreaming to a realization that both burros were standing quietly in camp near the packed gear. Reaching to the cold dutch oven Poke got left over biscuits and tossed them out. The burros nosed at them without much interest. By then Poke was on his feet, eyeing them keenly in the starlight.

Something was wrong.

The burros crowded closer to Poke.

He took the pipe from his mouth and went in silent strides to the adobe wall. Then he moved fast, going cautiously to the precariously balanced overhang of the opening in the rear wall. He listened before sliding through, his back against the hard mud.

Two guns roared, bullets splattered into the adobe beside him. The shots came from a mass of wreckage a hundred feet to the north. Poke tried vainly to get his gun out, failed. One bullet struck him, cutting a gash over his left eye. He doubled over, hot blood running into his eyes and down the side of his face. The guns kept going wildly, bullets singing above his body as he fell flat. He struggled weakly for a few seconds before giving up with a long-drawn sigh.

Poke lost consciousness for only a brief period. Vaguely he became aware of stealthy steps close by, of voices that grew stronger as his aching head cleared somewhat. Obviously this pair of bushwhackers thought him dead. He kept his eyes closed when one of the men struck a match and leaned down to peer into his bloody face.

"He's just a poor old desert rat," the man said. "Nobody looking for us."

"So what?" sneered his companion. "Since when did you get squeamish about killing a man?"

"Seems a shame a poor old feller who never got no fun out of life should end up like that."

"Yeah? You hate it so bad maybe you'd like to join him?"

A swift, dull silence and then the first man demanded hoarsely, "What do you mean?"

"What you should of guessed," the second man answered. "There ain't enough loot to go around!"

A gun roared deafeningly above Poke. A man cried in mortal agony, fell to the ground, dying.

After a bit steps moved away from the scene.

Poke lay still, trying desperately to collect himself. A couple of bad men fleeing from the law, he thought. They'd robbed a bank or maybe a train. Whatever their crime, Poke realized if the survivor returned and discovered him alive, his life would be worth no more than that of the man who had just been killed.

Presently faint noises from somewhere reached his ears. A stealthy breaking of boards, and a thud of earth later.

RISKING a move he turned his head upward, seeing only emptiness around the rotting buildings. Gritting his teeth against pain, Poke turned over, righted himself and got slowly to his feet. For a minute or so his head swam, and he waited until he felt steadier. His gun was still in the holster. He got his hat and slunk back through the opening in Wally Rosenberg's old store building.

Again Poke paused to let another dizzy spell pass. He was in a serious situation. Slowly he maneuvered along, keeping close to the wall for protection. An exploring finger told him the scalp wound wasn't bad, had already stopped bleeding. He just couldn't recover from such a blow as fast as he had done in the past.

Sadly Poke admitted to himself that age had slowed him down.

Reaching the street, Poke halted and reconnoitered anxiously. The falling building of a one-time restaurant stood nearest, but across the street. He started for it, making a rustle in the sand, and gained the sagging porch where he sat down. His next move must be planned carefully and carried out without delay. If the killer returned and found Poke gone, he would be after him again.

This happened much sooner than Poke had expected. He had hardly got the idea straight in his mind when a dark form appeared silhouetted against the east side of the Palace. A short, stifled exclamation of surprise brought Poke's head up.

"So you ain't dead after all!" The man's voice showed anger and, Poke thought, some panic.

Poke rolled off the porch as the first shot came. Ducking around to the west wall he broke into a zig-zag run for the end. Steps pounded across the sand to the other side. Poke stopped. The killer would expect him to break free of cover and wait for him. Poke turned back for the front of the building, trying

to hold in the sound of his labored breathing.

A board crashed and the man came through a hole in the wall into the old restaurant.

"Well, I'll be blasted!" came a loud mutter. "If he didn't come in here where did he get to?"

Boards creaked and groaned beneath his weight as he moved toward the front. He stumbled through a pile of refuse as he came out on the porch. Poke could see that he was a tall man even though he was bending forward.

He halted, scarce believing his eyes as he stared at Poke. Poke dropped to one knee, angled his gun a trifle, and shot him across six foot of space. The man fell, breaking a board in the floor when he hit all sprawled out.

The tension went out of Poke. Such excitement was too much for an old man, and wounded as he was, Poke felt an overpowering weariness. He returned to the adobe, doctored his head and lay down and went to sleep. In the morning he was roused from his deep sleep by the loud hee-hawing of the jenny. Poke roused himself to cook breakfast.

Afterwards he walked to the body that lay in the alley. Poke was surprised by the man's age—he was obviously past sixty—but the features were strange to him.

But the case of the man lying dead on the old restaurant porch proved different. This man, too, must have been in his sixties and still showed traces of a cold handsomeness. Filling his pipe, Poke walked out into the center of the street, his gaze drifting to the barrenness of the boothill cemetery. As he looked, a cloud of dust lifted beyond it. Riders were coming in from the south.

Unhurriedly Poke went down to the far corner of boothill. He was leaning against the one remaining post when the county sheriff pulled over accompanied by one deputy and three sunburned strangers. They halted, the three behind the officers considering Poke with suspicion, even hostility.

The sheriff, a young man, had been scowling, but now he smiled as he recognized Poke.

"These boys been having trouble up here," he announced. "Somebody shot into their camp night before last with a rifle. They been surveying the old dump of the Kopec. Getting a line on how much tonnage is in it because it contains vanadium."

"This must be the man who shot at us," one of the strangers declared. "Though why he would hang around until we came back with the law is more than I can understand."

"This man is Poke Stratton," the sheriff told them, and added in a lower voice, "Just a harmless old codger who spent too many years searching the Cerbats for what ain't there." Then in a rising tone, "Poke, you wouldn't be foolish enough to shoot at them now, would you?" Obviously he did not discount the possibility entirely despite what he had said to the strangers.

"Haven't carried a rifle in years," Poke replied stiffly. "Uh—you say they're surveying the Kopec dump to work it?"

"Some kind of vanadium in it. Fifty years ago it wasn't worth taking out—even if they knew how. So it slipped through with the rest of the tailings."

Poke's old eyes lighted up. "Booming?" he suggested, though without hope.

The sheriff laughed indulgently "Nope, old ghost town ain't coming to life, Poke. Sorry. They'll haul the stuff out to a plant what can refine it. You old fellers never give up that some day these places will come rich again, do you?"

Poke shook his head, winced sharply and pulled off his hat, exposing the wound. He told his story of the night attack.

The sheriff dispatched the deputy to find the camp of the dead men. One of the strangers went to their diggings for a shovel.

"Looks as though their idea was to prevent this deal," the sheriff pondered aloud thoughtfully, then shook his head. "It's no good. Wasn't valuable and workable enough. Why they'd got the idea, reckon we'll never know."

"They heard of the intended operation," one of the strangers declared. "Maybe got the idea they could prevent it, or claim it and take over for them-

selves. This work requires considerable operation in recovery, and besides we bought the whole thing from the government."

POKE was still at the edge of boothill when the bodies were brought to the upper corner. The deputy returned after the grave digging started. He had found the hidden camp in a draw north of the ghost town.

The sheriff was kneeling beside the bodies, going through the pockets of the clothing.

"Better see who they was and make a report," he decided, piling the effects beside each body. "I'll need witnesses to say what came from which one."

The dead men had carried the usual things—pocket knives, some money, tobacco, matches and a few papers. The only unusual things were two crisp, new documents. The sheriff puzzled over them a few minutes.

"Looks like this short one was named Johnson," he said, and his words jerked Poke back from the distant past into which he had once again drifted. "This other was named Edmunds."

"I calculated he was Slick Edmunds," Poke told him. "Returned after all these years. Neither died in the pen or was hanged."

"You knew them?" the sheriff demanded quickly.

"A long time ago," Poke replied casually. "We should of hung them before Cerbat City died. They was both ornery, mean men."

"Shucks." The sheriff glanced again at the documents. "These come from the State of California and it says here their life sentences were commuted to time served on account of their age. They ain't been out of the pen a month and here they lie dead."

The effects were wrapped, the bodies lowered and covered. Poke paid them scant attention. After all this time—was it forty or fifty years? —his memory was erratic. But Slick Edmunds had returned to die and be buried in the same ground containing the bones of Golden Mary, she of the light feet, the twinkling eyes and lilting voice that set men's blood on fire.

Across the years he could hear her voice again, singing in the Palace that tragic night that marked the beginning of the end for Cerbat City. Cerbat City would never be a real ghost town to Poke, because the movement of men, the clatter of riders and stage wheels would always be around him when he was here.

His nostalgic remembrances were interrupted as the men about him moved. They had performed a necessary task and were now preparing to go their ways. "What about him?" he heard one of the strangers ask. "Looks like he's gone completely daffy?"

"Poke?" came the sheriff's amused chuckle. "Oh, he'll keep wandering around the Cerbats and this desert, living in the past until he kicks in. Maybe some day we'll find his coyote-picked bones. Most likely not."

"Don't them old dreamers ever give up looking for gold where it can't be found?"

"Pshaw, no. They'll meet St. Peter to show him samples of color."

Poke went away from them, shuffling toward his camp. Reality returned for good. They were right. A lifetime wasted. Nothing gained. A failure he was. But he remembered Slick Edmunds, Golden Mary and all the others sleeping here. Wasted lives too, and death had come for them all, each in his turn in different ways.

He was cleaning up his camp when the sheriff rode back with his deputy and the horses and belongings of Edmunds and Johnson. The sheriff halted, his eyes speculative.

"Poke, you want to ride one of these horses to the county seat so's the doctor can see to your head wound?"

"Thankee kindly. I'll see you in town in a few days."

"Be sure to. You can sign a statement on what happened."

They rode off. Poke drove in the burros from beyond the edge of the ghost town. He noticed the strangers were again surveying the dump of the Kopec. Packing up slowly, Poke began to set things straight in his mind.

Slick Edmunds and his partner would have no use for vanadium, because it took a laboratory to refine it. That hadn't brought them straight to Cerbat

City on release from the pen. Remembering the words last night leading up to Johnson's murder, the stealthy breaking boards brought a puckered frown to Poke's brow.

Then as clear as day the truth struck him. For a minute it left him cold and weak. The more he thought about it, the more certain it became.

Wally Rosenberg had been killed because he knew, or correctly surmised, that Slick Edmunds and Johnson pulled the stage robbery. Maybe he had seen one or the other slipping back to town. Maybe it was Wally who saw them cache the gold bars in a good hiding place where they knew it would be safe. They had had to work fast, and that was why Edmunds was sweating so heavily in the Palace when the news broke right on the heels of what had happened.

The dark past had caught up with them here. They had lost out partly because they had been foolish enough to shoot at the surveyors to drive them off so they wouldn't be seen opening the cache. That was a laugh. Because of the time that had elapsed there could be no legal claimant to it. The gold bars belonged to whoever found them. But mostly they lost because Slick Edmunds had shot his long time compadre, greedily deciding the hoard would keep one old man nicely but never two. And all they'd had to do was recover the bars and ride their way, no matter who was around to see them.

Poke would never be sure that Wally had known the truth. Yet he was sure that somehow it connected with the hiding place. Likely the alley behind the store and the Palace. Eyes twinkling, Poke walked to it, glancing up the way. He guessed where the cache must be. The flight of Johnson and then Edmunds so long ago, their long imprisonment had prevented either from returning to recover the loot.

THE broken foundation behind the Palace showed fresh earth and confirmed Poke's guess. He went through the rear door of the Palace and turned to the stage. Here once Golden Mary's shapely ankles had skipped under her swinging skirt to bring in the customers. On the night of the holdup, the thunderous applause for her singing would have covered any sound made by a man digging under the stage. That would have been Johnson while Edmunds came around in front to cover any risks.

The boards that once formed the stage were broken and torn loose. Beneath was a space large enough for a man, a large hole with a short-handled shovel sticking in it.

Slick Edmunds hadn't quite reached the loot last night.

Poke let himself down into the hole. He picked up the shovel stuck it into the ground, and at once came in contact with an obstruction.

In a matter of moments he had uncovered the five bars of gold from the Kopec, each ten thousand dollars. He laid them up on the sagging floor boards. He studied them a moment, considering the remarkable lucky break after all these fruitless years. Then he went for Skat and threw away the water kegs and most of the contents of the panniers.

"We won't be needing 'em no more," he allowed to Skat, as he led the burro back, "as we ain't coming back this way —ever again."

Loading the bars into the panniers he covered them, scratched the burro's ears and prepared to depart.

He went out ahead of the patient burros, breaking the south edge of the ghost town. Halting there, he turned to give it a final survey.

Finding the gold bars had not brought back the past. Cerbat City was just what it was, a mass of storied, worthless ruins.

Poke turned southward, his step springy and easy.

Tonight he would camp at Soapy Wells. The following day would see him at the county seat.

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Look Forward to a Stirring Novelet of Pioneer Hardship and Adventure

–WHEELS WITHOUT HOOFS, by SYL MacDOWELL, Next Issue!

(Continued from page 8)

the backyard stretches out a mile or so to the horizon.

Montana Weather

What's the weather like? Everybody wants to know that though there is little they can do about it one way or the other. Sure, it sometimes gets almighty cold in the winter and the mountains particularly are beset by deep snows. But it is those snows that, melting in the spring, provide the water for the streams and irrigation ditches in Montana's valleys during the summer growing season. Without them the country wouldn't be worth a hoot for farming.

The truth is: don't let Montana's climate scare you. It is high, healthful with a special invigorating zip in the air and far less rugged in winter, taking the state as a whole, than many people realize.

Generally speaking outdoor occupations can be carried on year around with little discomfort if you dress sanely. Moreover Montana winters are traditionally tempered by "chinooks" from the west coast—mild, warm, gentle breeze. The really severe cold snaps are usually of short duration. Though days are warm and even hot, in summer, cool comfortable sleeping nights are the rule.

A fellow with the West seriously in mind and some concrete knowledge of what Western farming or even small scale cattle ranching involves can find plenty of opportunity to get a start in Montana. But first let him tally up what his means are, what his experience is and make a double-check to be sure he has the wide-open spaces in his blood and all that it represents in a willingness to undertake hard, healthy physical work.

Riding the range on a cow pony, camp fires and song-fests to the accompaniment of a plinking "gittar" are by no means all there is to ranching—anywhere in the West. They are colorful, romantic, etc., but only a small part of the day in and day out business.

A Round of Chores

As one old time Montanan put it, "Cattle-raising is the dangedest round of tomfool chores. It's fence, hay, winter feed, spring and summer pasture, dust, drought in summer, snow in winter, bills, taxes, and the interest on your loan at the bank. It'll weary your bones, and shorten your years."

Then he grinned, and added, "But dog-gone it, it's a mighty lot o' fun too. Wouldn't swap it for anything else in the world. Besides if things come out all right, durned if you don't make money at it. Just bought my wife a new Ford for Christmas last year. The Buick I'm driving's two years old but I figger I can wait till beef roundup this fall to get myself a new one. Got two kids in college. The boy is in agricultural school. The other one's a girl. She'll be a teacher. We can use teachers out here in the back country."

You'll Like the Trip

Still think you want to try ranching or farming in Montana? All right, and more power to you. But take this tip. Visit the state first by all means. Take it leisurely. You are going to make perhaps the most important decision of your life. And believe me, whatever else comes of it, you'll enjoy the trip.

Visit around. Talk to ranchers, cowboys, farmers, storekeepers—anybody you can in the towns that are farm and ranch centers. Go in and see the banker too. You may get some hoorawing. That's just Western fun. To see if you can take it. Once folks find you are in earnest, they'll help. At least most of them will.

Decide what suits you best. The mountain country, the broad endless plains, or irrigated farming. Then hunt around in that section for the sort of place you have in mind. Talk to county agricultural agents at the county seats. Get in touch with the Extension Service, Montana State College, Bozeman, Montana and the Montana Department of Agriculture, Labor and Industry. They can help you with a lot of useful facts and figures. Maybe make some suggestions.

A Wide Variety

Here's another lead. So can the Agricultural Development Department of the

Northern Pacific Railway, St. Paul, Minnesota.

As far as farm lands or very small ranches go there is a wide variety of types, choices, locations—and prices. Generally price is geared to the improvements and the productive capacity of the land. There is no specific answer to the question how much would a farm or ranch cost in Montana any more than there is to the question how much does an automobile cost. It depends on the property, or on the car.

Some small properties are reasonable in the amount of investment required. A few thousand dollars perhaps to get started. Others cost more.

Just remember both ranching and farming in the West—Montana included—are real businesses today. They require, as any business does, a certain monetary investment as well as your time and energy. The wagon-train days of shoestring starts are pretty much a thing of the past.

On the other hand the returns are surer and on a living income basis that few pioneers ever thought possible in their

[*Turn page*]

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wildest dreams. That is the other side of the picture.

Mining? Sure, if you are a beans and bacon prospector. Mining camps, big and little, still dot the mountain sections of the Treasure State and hopeful prospectors continue to haunt the out-of-the-way mountain gulches. But that properly is another story. We'll talk about it another time.

Meantime, thanks for listenin', friends. See you all again next issue. And if you are keen on settling in the West, set down Montana way up near the head of your list!

—CAPTAIN RANGER

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

NEVER murder or otherwise kill, dispose of or cause to disappear a Cattlemen's Association Inspector—at least as long as Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith continue to vacillate around the fringes of that organization—for you are likely to find that those two long-geared laugh-makers have penetrated by psychic or other means to your most remote and impregnable hideout, and are about to proceed to drag you through a catclaw clump, wrap you three times round a barrel cactus and hang your warped remains in the upper branches of a hackmatack.

Do not ask me how we know this, for we believe along with Tombstone and Speedy that education is a dangerous thing, and if a man gets in the habit of reading things, the first thing you know he will start believing them. Which is why, perhaps, those two cow cops are so successful in getting enough expense money coming in from their boss, Jim Keating, to keep them eating most of the time between jobs—no mean achievement in itself. For their practise at not believing anything they read, very little of what they hear, and only half of what they see has helped to make them adept at befuddling others.

In the next EXCITING WESTERN, in an opus entitled HORSE-SHOE LUCK, W. C. Tuttle, the perpetrator of these peripatetic beanpoles, has immersed them in just such a murder as mentioned above. There is also a tenderfoot in it and some gunplay and a ranch that the tenderfoot is supposed to have inherited, but which the local lawyer maintains belongs to some woman client of his.

Now in spite of the fact that Tombstone and Speedy are so thin their hearts have to beat up and down instead of sideways, those hearts are just as warm and assay as high in gold content as the next man's—in fact more—for out West it is not customary to feel helpful toward greenhorns from the East and anyone who does so can claim a bigger heart than the average. Some claim that the hearts of Tombstone and Speedy are able to be so big simply because there is more room for a heart beating up and down than for one beating sidewise—and that this gives them an unfair advantage.

Howsomever that may be, they take this young man with a ranch under their wings, and fly with him through as fast and furious a novelet as ever sped from the keys of the great Tuttle's typewriter. For a real reading treat, look forward to HORSE-SHOE LUCK, the next rollicking Tombstone and Speedy novelet!

And in a more serious vein is the novelet for the next issue, WHEELS WITHOUT HOOFS, by Syl MacDowell, famed author of the Painted Post yarns in POPULAR WESTERN and the Swap and Whopper stories in THRILLING WESTERN.

It is a little known fact that a great many of the pioneers trekked the West afoot, sometimes whole families packing their posessions in handcarts. Between 1856 and 1861 nearly 4000 emigrants toiled west with no other means of conveyance than shank's mare, and it is around one of those families of hoofers that Mr. MacDowell has constructed WHEELS WITHOUT HOOFS.

The Jordan family, however, were not traveling afoot by choice. Their horses and most of their goods had been stolen by a white renegade named Joe Quayle. So the family of four, Jeremiah, his wife Martha; the baby Julie; and the fifteen-year-old Wayne, made out the best they could afoot and pulling a hand cart, and trying to keep up with the wagon train of Silas Martindale, an impatient, apprehensive and haste-harried man, who finally abandoned them to their own devices and the threatening bands of hostile Utes, Piutes, Arapahoes and Cheyennes.

The Jordans were heading for the Redrock country in the thick of the hunting grounds of the Utes, where they were going to join Jeremiah Jordan's brother. It is mainly the story of young Wayne Jordan and how he measured up to the vicissitudes of the

trail. Fifteen seems mighty young today, but in the days of the pioneers a fifteen-year-old lad was supposed to take a man's place. Men mature early under necessity, and at the time when boys today are graduating from high-school they might be leaders of wagon trains or captains of square-rigged sailing ships.

How Wayne develops and learns to meet any emergency that tough luck and trail troubles can pile on him makes a story that will hold you fascinated all the way through.

Another interesting character in the tale is the old scout, Brad Billings, who gives the Jordans some good advice when they have to leave the wagon train, and would have gone along, if he hadn't given his word to see the outfit as far as the Snake. Brad was a shrewd, wiry, ageless frontierman, whiskered to the eyes. He carried a long rifle, always ready across the front of his saddle. When he heard the Jordans were leaving, he

[*Turn page*]

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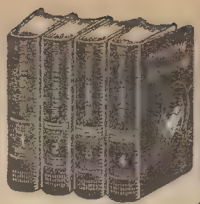

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loped into their camp on his dun mustang. Speaking of Martindale, he said, "Danged if ol' Hurrybreeches didn't just now let on that our trails forked here."

"That's right," Jeremiah replied with an attempt at a smile. "Wheels without hoofs are too slow for Captain Martindale."

"Humph!" snorted the scout. "He'll be on wheels with nothin' to turn 'em at his rushin' rate of travel. Grass fed critters can be crowded just so much. . . . Where you 'uns headed for?"

"To join my brother in the Redrock country."

"Criminy! That's Ute country!" the scout exclaimed.

"How much farther is it to this Redrock country?" asked Martha.

"Depends, Ma'am. There's a way through that'd git yuh thar before leaves fall. That is, if the Utes and their second cousins, the Piutes, ain't infestin' the route."

Scout Billings swung from the saddle and spread a map that Jeremiah handed him on the ground. He took a charred stick from the edge of the fire, and rapidly described the route, marking the map as he spoke. The Martindale wagons were strung out now, heading up along the winding South Platte. His instructions were interrupted by an angry shout. Captain Martindale was riding toward them.

"Criminy, I better go cool down old Hurrybreeches," Brad Billings said. He picked up his long gun and leaped into the saddle. But before he took off, the scout stood in one stirrup, fished a leather pouch out of his grimy buckskins, leaned down and gave it to Wayne.

"Here, sonny," he said, "take this good luck piece. Chances are you 'uns will be in bigger need of it than me."

He took off then, for Martindale. The leather pouch was extraordinarily heavy for the small lump it contained. Wayne opened the drawstrings, and spilled the object into his palm. It was a bullet, moulded to fit a heavy caliber rifle such as the scout carried. But no ordinary lead bullet, this. It gleamed dully in the growing light. Jeremiah stared, wide-eyed.

"Good glory!" he exclaimed. "It's gold—pure, native gold!"

And so this is the story of a fifteen year old boy and a golden bullet. And how the golden bullet affected the life of the boy

will appear in the next EXCITING WESTERN. Also look forward to many more stories and features of outstanding quality in addition to the two big headliners.

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

THERE has been considerable discussion among readers in regard to whether or not it would be advisable to bring together, on occasion, the different characters who appear regularly in various of the THRILLING PUBLICATIONS—for instance, Jim Hatfield of TEXAS RANGERS; Bob Pryor and his partner Mireles in the RIO KID WESTERN; Steve Reese and his nonchalant helpers, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, who dig up action for RANGE RIDERS WESTERN; Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, El Hlacon, The Hawk, otherwise known as Walt Slade in THRILLING WESTERN and Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, W. C. Tuttle's hellions of hilarity who ramrod EXCITING WESTERN, to name a few of the principal ones.

Whether or not this merging of the West's most famous heroes of fiction in one story or

[*Turn page*]

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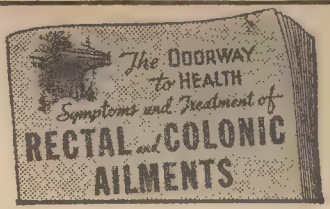

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or having any of them meet in one story is good or wise, we leave to you readers. Here's one typical opinion:

EXCITING WESTERN, RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, TEXAS RANGERS are the best Western books on the market today. I agree with Bert Thomas of Marshall, Saskatchewan, Canada, about those famous lawmen meeting up with each other. I would like to see Jones and Smith meet up with Steve Reese, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. That sure would be some meeting. What ever become of old Doc Swap? Please bring the old boy back again.

I would like to read a story of how Jim Hatfield got his sorrel horse, Goldie. Why can't Hatfield and Walt Slade meet up with each other? After all they both are in Texas. What ever became of Alamo Paige, the Pony Express rider in EXCITING WESTERN! Well, I reckon I've said enough. *Hasta luego.—Merle Batzner, Flag, Arkansas*

Well, Merle, we hope some of these things come to pass. Saw Doc Swap a few days ago, and he was mighty busy with an epidemic of cowboy foot itch, but says he'll try to get into a story soon as he can. Alamo Paige went to Africa to introduce American methods of handling wild cattle to the natives of the Veldt, but he might be around when that chore is finished, if he doesn't get fatally injured. Seriously, Merle, you didn't really say enough. Wish our readers would write longer letters. We always find what you have to say interesting.

Today I received the January copy of your magazine. I think that W. C. Tuttle is about the best of Western writers. You can't beat his stories of Sad Sontag, Hashknife, Tombstone, Sheriff Henry Conroy.—*Gary Drinnon, Gozad, Ohio*

Can't quarrel with your opinion, Gary, for we have held the same one for some thirty years.

I am, perhaps, set in my ways, but my chief reading for sixty odd years has been Westerns. When I was a lad I read dime novels by the score. Can't even remember the names of most of them or who wrote them, but when writers like Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Owen Wister, Stewart Edward White, Will James, Frederick Remington, Walt Coburn, and the latest Bud Guthrie and Walter Van Tilburgh Clark began to write I really began to take notice. I've read

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so much that I feel as though I had been a part of Western history, myself. And don't think I don't find some top-grade stuff in the regular Western magazines. I've been a Tuttle fan for years, and for spontaneous chuckles, fast action, suspense holding plots, and authentic detail straight from the range country, for my money you can't beat the Tombstone and Speedy stories. Keep 'em comin'.—*Ibrock Z. Pike, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

We'll do that Mr. Pike. Just as long as old Tut is able to cart wood to his typewriter, we'll keep feeding it out to you. Unless of course Tombstone and Speedy should happen to stop a few hundred bullets in the course of their highly legal activities. However, even in that event, we have the feeling that probably with hombres of such extraordinary staying powers, where you planted one two would sprout.

Well, folks, it's about time to close this department, but we'll print a lot more letters in coming issues. Meanwhile, keep them rolling in. Whether acknowledged in this department or not, every one is carefully read and deeply appreciated, and many are answered personally. So keep addressing your mail—a postcard will do as well as a sealed letter—to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN. 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. We're waiting to hear from *you*.

Many thanks. See you next issue, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

NEXT ISSUE'S

HEADLINERS

●

HORSE-SHOE LUCK

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

WHEELS WITHOUT HOOFS

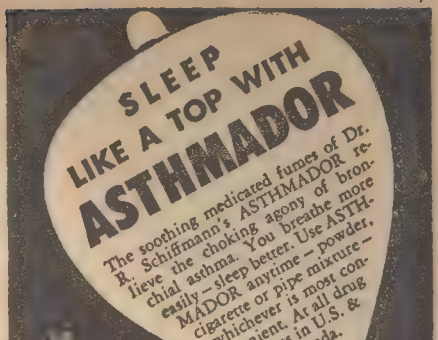
A Pioneer Days Novelet

By SYL MacDOWELL

HAVE A HARP, RANGER

A Navajo Raine Story

By JACKSON COLE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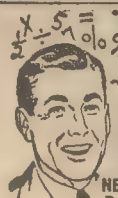

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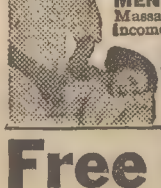

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